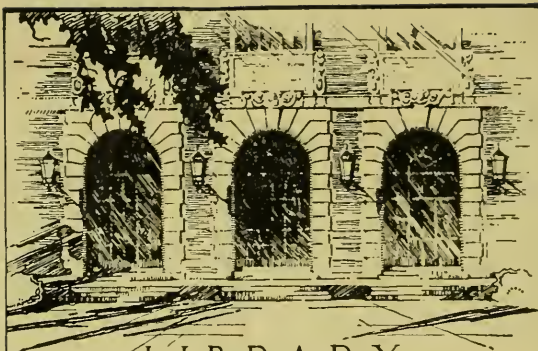




LIBRARY
OF THE
UNIVERSITY
OF ILLINOIS

823

W872c

v.2

CHARLIE.

A WAIF'S HISTORY,

TOLD BY HIMSELF.

BY

MRS. WOODWARD,

AUTHOR OF

"MERTONVILLE PARK," "EDITH VIVIAN'S EXPERIENCE OF THE
WORLD," "WILL SHE BE HAPPY?" "ELLEN CLINTON,"

"MR. FAVERSHAM'S NEW YEAR'S GUEST,"
ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



London :

SAMUEL TINSLEY & CO.,
31, SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND.

1880.

[*All Rights Reserved.*]



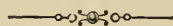
Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2010 with funding from
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

823
W872 ~
v. 2

CONTENTS OF VOL. II.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. AN UNEXPECTED OFFER - - - -	1
II. DESERTED - - - - -	19
III. A CHANGED DESTINY - - - -	41
IV. FATHER AND SON - - - - -	62
V. THE COMMENCEMENT OF MY DIFFICULTIES -	82
VI. A NOBLE ALLY - - - - -	103
VII. THE RESULT OF LORD WILLOUGHBY'S EX- PERIMENT - - - - -	125
VIII. AT THE VICARAGE - - - - -	142
IX. MR. STAFFORD'S ATTENTIONS - - -	168
X. I FEEL CONSTRAINED TO PERFORM AN UN- PLEASANT OFFICE - - - - -	189
XI. MISS VAUGHAN PUZZLES ME - - -	211
XII. WHAT IS YOUR NAME? - - - -	234

CHARLIE.



CHAPTER I.

AN UNEXPECTED OFFER.

“ Still our place is kept, and it will wait,
Ready for us to fill it, soon or late ;
No star is ever lost we once have seen,
We always may be what we might have been ;
Since good, though only thought, has life and breath,
God’s life can always be redeemed from death :
And evil in its nature is decay,
And any hour can blot it all away ;
And hopes that lost in some far distance seem,
May be the truer life, and this the dream.”

HAVING once carried his point with regard to my spending the vacation with his son in Yorkshire, old Mr. Fortescue seemed to take it for granted that I was to go on as I had

begun ; and so earnest did he become in his solicitations, so kind in his expressions of satisfaction at the progress which Harold had already made in his studies, and the general improvement there was in his whole conduct (which improvement he insisted on ascribing entirely to myself), and so evidently anxious that he should not again, even for ever so brief a period, be left to his own devices, that I found it quite impossible to do anything but comply with his wishes, backed up as those wishes were by Harold himself, whose affection for me, instead of growing weakened as time passed on, appeared to become, if anything, stronger and more confirmed.

In consequence of these periodical adjournments, therefore, to Fortescue Hall, I saw comparatively little of the Vaughans, although the vicar still continued to pay me an occasional visit, and at rare intervals he brought his daughter to Middlebury just for a few hours, when I had an opportunity of again spending a short time in her society.

And now, in accordance with my promise that I would not linger too long over these

early scenes, which, however deeply interesting they may be to my individual self, I can scarcely expect my readers to look upon in the same partial and absorbing light, I will pass over all that transpired during the interval, and take up my story just where my course of study at the Middlebury College ended, and I found myself, as I have already briefly intimated, the proud winner of an open scholarship, and several other hard-won honours besides.

I do not think that, in spite of my successes, I had any enemies among the students ; and I mention this fact not by way of reflecting credit upon myself, but merely to show that so far as my own experience goes it does not by any means follow, that to be successful in obtaining these sort of public distinctions one must necessarily incur the jealous dislike of the other and less fortunate candidates. Wherever I went I was congratulated most warmly, and, I fully believe, *sincerely*, upon having gained the prize I so earnestly coveted ; and not one envious or invidious remark did I overhear, not one hostile or unkind look did I encounter, to diminish from my satis-

faction, or make me feel that I was the object of anyone's anger or hatred.

Mr. Whitworth's approbation was very sweet to me just then—all the more so, perhaps, because he was not as a rule lavish of his encomiums, reserving them for rare and special occasions, and appearing somewhat inclined to imagine that it was better to err on the side of bestowing too little, rather than too much actual praise.

Now, however, he made no secret of his satisfaction, and was by no means illiberal in his expressions of kindly commendation.

Harold Fortescue was pleased too ; as every additional prize that I gained seemed in some roundabout way, he laughingly declared, to reflect a certain degree of lustre upon himself, and made him all the more proud of me, and disposed to treat me with added respect ; but there was no denying the fact that his gratification in reference to this last success was greatly tempered by the prospect of my approaching disappearance from the Middlebury scenes, and consequent separation from himself.

But for this he would, I believe, have been almost wild in his delight, so completely did

he identify himself with anything and everything which seemed likely, either directly or indirectly, to affect my own present well-being, or conduce to my future prosperity.

To describe my personal feelings when the announcement was first made of my having gained this much-longed-for distinction, and thus had the way made plain for me to go up to Oxford, without entrenching further upon Mr. Vaughan's liberality, would be simply impossible.

A wild chaos of mingled emotions awoke within me: rose-coloured visions uprose before my excited imagination of future laurels to be won, when I should once find myself within those venerable halls of learning, where talent is always, sooner or later, recognised and appreciated, and perseverance must eventually be crowned with success.

Yes, I—waif though I undoubtedly was—would carve out a destiny for myself, and though, properly speaking; I could scarcely be said to possess a name at all, yet such as it was I would do my best to make it worthy of him who had in the first instance selected

it as the most appropriate by which I could under the circumstances be known.

In the midst of my day-dreams the door of the little study where I happened to be sitting, for a wonder alone, was suddenly opened, and Mr. Whitworth came in.

"I suppose you are thinking of Oxford?" he observed, regarding me with a glance of semi-investigation.

"Yes," I answered, somewhat surprised at his considering it necessary even to ask the question, for what else could I be thinking of at the present moment?

"Ah, I fancied so!" and there was a grave smile upon his face; "building castles, no doubt, as to all the wonderful things you will accomplish when you once get there."

"I hope they may be more substantial than mere castles in the air, sir," I answered, with a little flush of uneasiness. Hitherto his words had been so hopeful and encouraging, his congratulations so warm and sincere, that I could not quite understand what he meant by again alluding to the subject in this apparently careless and irrelevant manner.

"Well, I hope so too," he replied, rather

absently ; “ but,” rousing himself and looking at me once more with a keen scrutinising glance, “ what I came to tell you was this : I have received a letter from Sir Stafford Stafford—you know the name ?—he is a great friend of Mr. Fortescue.”

“ Yes, I have heard of him,” I assented, as Mr. Whitworth stopped, apparently expecting me to reply.

“ He has a son, who is not quite so steady as could be wished. His health, too, is far from good, and nothing suits him except constant travelling ; but as he is too weak-minded to be trusted alone, or exposed to the tender mercies of his valet, it is an absolute necessity that he should have the constant companionship of someone who will exercise a restraining influence over him, and try, as far as possible, to elevate his character, and help him to shake off these bad habits which he has unfortunately formed, and which must, if indulged in, prove ruinous alike to soul and body.”

Thus far I had listened with an air of perfect amazement, not having the slightest suspicion to what this preamble would tend. But suddenly it dawned across my mind

what Mr. Whitworth really meant, and I set my lips firmly together, while giving my attention to the rest of his explanation.

“When he takes a crotchet into his head he is rather obstinate, too, it seems, and he flatly refuses to have anything to say to the people whom his father has hitherto recommended. They are all too old, he says; he wants someone about the same age as himself—someone, moreover, whom he feels he can like; and as Sir Stafford has often heard of you from the Fortescues, who are, as you know, never weary of talking about the influence you so rapidly acquired over Harold, he has written to say that if you will accept the post of travelling tutor to his son, he will allow you three hundred pounds a year, besides travelling and other incidental expenses, and will do everything in his power to ensure your comfort.”

For a minute or two I was too thoroughly overcome by surprise to be able to speak, seeing which, Mr. Whitworth went on, still in the same quiet matter-of-fact tones which he had previously used :

“Sir Stafford says his son met you once or twice at Fortescue Hall, and took quite a

fancy to you ; so that there would be no obstacles to be encountered so far as *he* is concerned. By-the-bye," he added hastily, "have you any recollection of seeing him?"

"Yes, I remember him perfectly," I answered, with a sort of half stupefied, bewildered air, "but I think, if you don't mind Mr. Whitworth," I went on, rousing myself, "I would rather keep to my first arrangement, and go to Oxford."

"You will do just as you please about that, my boy," he responded, very kindly ; "I considered it my duty to put the matter before you precisely as it stands, and then leave you to accept or reject, as you thought proper."

"Thank you," I began ; "I am sure——"

"You ought, at all events, to be allowed sufficient time to enable you to get accustomed to the idea before announcing your final decision," quietly interrupted my companion, before I had had time to finish my sentence, "so we will leave it an open question until to-morrow," he went on, rising from his seat, and glancing hastily at his watch, as if he had all at once remembered some appointment, "and then I shall be probably more at

leisure, and able to send off a more suitable letter to Sir Stafford than I should at present have time for."

Having thus explained his wishes on the subject, he hurried away, leaving me in a very extraordinary and wholly unsatisfactory frame of mind.

Not that he had actually spoken as if he expected me to accept this sudden and unanticipated offer; and consequently he would not of course, be annoyed at my declining it.

Still, the fact of its having been made at all perplexed and unsettled me, and rendered me decidedly uncomfortable; and though I tried hard, I found it utterly impossible to shake off the unpleasant impression which had been produced upon my mind, or entirely recover my own shaken self-confidence.

I did not for one moment, however, *waver* so far as my own projected plans were concerned; I was too thoroughly in earnest for that—too eagerly bent on taking advantage of the opening which had been thus auspiciously afforded me for making my *débüt* upon the Oxford scenes, to be influenced even by the tempting prospect of three

hundred pounds a year and travelling *ad libitum* !

Under other circumstances, no doubt these inducements might have proved irresistible, but at present I was too much in love with study—too ambitious also, I suppose I ought to add—to feel the slightest wish to change my little programme.

And yet, as I have already said, I was uncomfortable, without exactly being able to realise from whence this sense of discomfort arose, or analyse my feelings sufficiently to determine how it was that this unsolicited proposal on the part of the Staffords should have left so indefinable and yet so strangely agitating an impression upon me.

It was really not worth thinking about, I over and over again reminded myself, and yet, somehow, I *did* think about it, greatly to my own irritation and annoyance.

At last I rose impatiently from my seat, walked out into the hall, seized my cap, and left the house.

A sort of restlessness had suddenly taken possession of me, something similar to that which I had often experienced after poor Mr. Joyce's death ; and as on those occasions

I invariably set out on one of those long solitary rambles upon the sea shore, returning calmed and tranquillised in spirit, and able to look upon things in a more hopeful and contented light, so now I felt that a glimpse of the fair sweet page of nature would refresh and do me good, and perhaps restore to me something of my former confidence and self-gratulation.

But it was not so easy to find one's self alone with nature here as at Saltsea. The busy hum of life surrounded me on all sides, and before I had walked more than a few yards, the contrast struck me with such force and vividness that I almost smiled at the impulse which had led me to set forth in quest of those quiet country scenes which I could not possibly expect to reach, within so limited a time as that which happened just then to be at my disposal.

Accordingly, I halted in my somewhat rapid course, and after hastily glancing at my watch—one of old Mr. Fortescue's gifts—I suddenly wheeled round, and strode off in another direction, never once pausing until I arrived at the Cathedral.

It had all at once occurred to me that the

last of a series of special weekly services was to be held there this very afternoon, and though I knew I should certainly be late, I yet decided on attending it.

A sort of awe stole over me as I entered the venerable edifice, with its magnificent architecture, richly ornamented choir, and far-famed painted windows, through which a "dim religious light" came mellowed and softened from the outer world, producing an almost instantaneous effect upon my chafed and agitated mind, and making my thoughts insensibly rise to something higher than the petty concerns of earth and earth's warfare; something nobler and more elevating than time's little day; more solid and substantial than the firmest and most enduring foundations of a world which, despite its apparent stability, its outward pomp and show, its imposing greatness and fascinating charms, must sooner or later pass away!

There was a hush just as I entered, and quietly took my seat behind a pillar almost close to the choir; and then—ah, how exquisitely sweet it sounded!—came the anthem: "*Oh, rest in the Lord;*" and I instantly recognised the voice which took the solo as

belonging to a youth about whom all Middlebury was raving, so marvellously full of power, and pathos, and softness, and clearness was it—so thrillingly expressive, so entrancingly melodious.

And as the first words fell upon my ears they brought with them a strange new startling thought, which came to me like an illuminating flash amidst the darkness ; a curiously vivid impression of something which I had hitherto neglected and forgotten, a great fact which I had never before properly valued or believed in, much less acted upon.

“Oh, rest in the Lord, wait patiently for Him, and He shall give thee thy heart's desires.”

Often and often I had heard it sung before, but never with the same effect ; never had my whole soul been stirred with a glow like this ; a longing that was akin to—nay, *was*—pain in its intensity ; a consciousness of being in darkness, yet wanting the light, brought, for the first time face to face with the important truth, not as a vague theory, but a solemn reality, “That it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps.”

I do not pretend to explain how it was that I should thus find myself, all in a moment, as it were, enlightened on a subject of which I had remained during the whole of my former life practically ignorant ; neither can I presume to answer the question which more than once I afterwards mentally asked myself, as to the why and the wherefore of my being on that particular occasion, and in that particular place, taught a lesson which not all Mr. Joyce's early instruction, consisting not merely of "line upon line and precept upon precept," but also *example*, nor the many religious privileges and advantages which I had subsequently enjoyed, had failed effectually to teach me.

I had certainly endeavoured to do my duty ; held steadily aloof from those who would have tempted me to become careless or irregular in my habits ; scorned to tell a lie, or be guilty of a petty meanness ; but I had also, without doubt, prided myself upon these things, forgetting that mere morality is not Christianity. I had trusted far too much also to my own efforts for success, and although I had obtained it, and that in no scant measure, I could not be quite so sure,

now that my heart was touched and my conscience awakened, that I had altogether deserved it.

And still the magnificent voice went on :
“ *Commit thy way unto Him, and trust in Him.*”

Ah ! this was just what I had *not* done. I had been vain, and presumptuous, and self-reliant ; priding myself upon my own natural abilities, which, now that my eyes were opened, I saw not to be mine at all, but only talents entrusted to me by God himself ; had set about everything in my own unaided strength, and expected to reap, as it were, to my own glory.

My face was hidden in my hands by this time, and when the concluding words were at length sung—“ *Oh, rest in the Lord, and wait—wait patiently for Him*”—I stayed to hear no more of the service, but left my seat as quietly as I could, and passed like one in a dream out into the street.

That afternoon marked a new epoch in my history. I learnt to recognise another hand than human in all the affairs, momentous or petty, which go to make up the sum of one’s mortal life ; and I learnt also to trust in the

Lord, to commit my way unto Him ; and *then*, I was ready to wait.

But for what ? everything seemed so plainly marked out for me ; my future looked bright and prosperous ; for had I not already obtained my heart's desire ? so far as this world's prospects were concerned, and as for my Oxford career, if I had not feared it before, when I had *only* my own unaided strength to rely upon, surely I should fear it less than ever now that I had the promise of help from one who "giveth liberally, and upbraideth not."

Ah ! how little we know what may be on the morrow ! and how often it happens that the seasons of our greatest joys and triumphs—when no shadow of a cloud can be descried upon the horizon, no glimmer of doubt appears to disturb our peace and equanimity, no faint suspicion even of coming difficulty presents itself to our imagination—are merely introductory to some deep and mysterious trial, some dark and unlooked-for calamity, which it needs all our recently acquired strength, all the special elevation of spirit which we had so lately been permitted to enjoy, the bright hopefulness which had

made the future look joyous and beautiful exceedingly, to enable us to bear without being utterly crushed beneath the unexpected load.

This is how I found it in my own experience.

I was sitting alone in our usual study the following morning, shortly after breakfast—Mr. Whitworth and his pupils having gone off to the college, leaving me to the pleasant task of answering a most kind and flattering letter which I had just received from Dr. Parkinson—the principal—in which he had inclosed some notes of introduction to two or three of the Oxford Professors, who would, he assured me, be both able and willing to assist and encourage me in my laudable endeavours to obtain an independent position for myself—when the door was suddenly thrown open, and there entered, to my profound astonishment, no less a personage than Mrs. Green !

CHAPTER II.

DESERTED.

“But now ’tis o’er, the dear delusion’s o’er !
A stagnant breezeless air becalms my soul,
A fond aspiring candidate no more,
I scorn the palm before I reach the goal !”

“Out of thy woes be strong.”

“You are surprised to see me, Charlie ?” she observed, as I hastily sprang from my chair, and advanced to meet her.

“Indeed, yes,” I answered, after we had exchanged greetings, “I don’t think I was ever *more* surprised,” and I glanced inquiringly at her, by way of asking for an explanation.

She said nothing for a minute or two, however, but I could not help noticing that her countenance exhibited signs of very

considerable excitement; and there was a sort of set look about her mouth which showed that the calmness of her tone and manner had been assumed with difficulty.

From all this, therefore, I concluded that, hearing of my approaching departure for Oxford, she had, in opposition to her husband's commands, determined on paying me this visit, and that they had, in consequence, quarrelled.

I may here mention—what I omitted to allude to in its proper place—that long before this Mr. Green had been dismissed from his post as parish schoolmaster, his irregular habits having increased to that degree, that it was no longer possible even to delude the authorities into the belief that he was anything but a thoroughly incompetent and most unsteady and unprincipled man. Greatly to my surprise, however, and relief, I found that instead of leaving the neighbourhood in disgust, as I fully expected would be the case, he seemed inclined to settle quietly down in his wife's comfortable little cottage, without looking out for any other kind of occupation; and the last news I had heard of him was that he had become on the whole decidedly

improved since his dismissal from the school, treated Mrs. Green much better, and appeared wishful to redeem his lost character.

Still, I had carefully refrained from making any attempt to see her, thinking it better to let well alone; as I could not be at all sure what effect it might have upon him, were he to discover that we were in the habit of meeting ever so occasionally, his intensely tyrannical and jealously exacting disposition, rendering it an extremely dangerous experiment for his poor wife to venture to act contrary to his wishes, on this no less than every other subject.

Now, however, I could not help fearing that she had incurred his displeasure, by following for once her own devices, instead of his; and there was a good deal of anxiety in my tone, as I asked presently:

“Did you come to Middlebury on purpose to see me?”

“Yes,” she replied, and her voice still sounded forced and unnatural, “I could not *help* coming; I heard that you were going to Oxford almost immediately, and I felt that I *must* see you first.”

“It is a great pleasure to me,” I said, rather hesitatingly, “but what about yourself?—won’t Mr. Green be angry?”

Such a bitter smile came over the white set lips as I asked the question; and there was a ring of pain in her voice as she answered shortly:

“No, he won’t mind—now.”

“Why, what does it all mean, mother?” and I got up and put my hand upon her shoulder, while I looked affectionately into her face; “will you not tell me all about it?”

“Oh, Charlie!” and the forced unnatural calmness all forsook her, and seizing my hand in both her own, she bowed her head and broke into a passion of weeping; “I did not intend you to know it, but oh! I did so yearn to see you once more; and I fancied I could control myself, and now your sympathy has upset me, and I don’t know what I am saying.”

These words came out slowly and spasmodically between her sobs, and instead of enlightening me, they only served to render me more anxious and mystified than before.

“There, mother, you will soon be better,”

I said, soothingly, after a while ; “ you mustn’t trouble too much, you know, whatever it is,” I added, with a clumsy attempt at consolation ; “ and by-and-by, when you have told me all about it, I may perhaps be able to help you.”

Although I spoke thus hopefully, I must confess I did not feel any particular confidence in my own powers in this respect, as I should, I knew, be the very last person whose intervention between himself and his wife Mr. Green would tolerate.

“ It seems selfish of me, coming to you with my troubles,” continued the poor woman, when she had somewhat recovered herself, and could speak rather more lucidly, “ but, indeed, I had no intention of doing so when I set out. I only thought of the comfort it would be to see you——”

“ Never mind that, mother,” I quickly interposed, seeing that her feelings were once more about to get the better of her, “ just tell me *what* the troubles are. Is it Mr. Green ?” and I waited anxiously for the reply.

“ Yes—oh, Charlie, would you believe it !” and now the tears suddenly ceased, and her

face expressed nothing but indignation, "he has actually gone away—left me!"

"Left you?" I echoed, fairly bewildered for the moment; "not for good, surely?"

"Yes, or *evil*!" was the bitterly sorrowful reply. "Two or three days ago he disappeared, and——" she paused just for an instant, as if the words almost choked her, then went on hurriedly: "he will never come back again."

"Perhaps you will get on better without him," I observed, in my ignorance.

"He has laid his plans too well for that," she gloomily responded.

"What do you mean?" I demanded, a nameless fear stealing over me.

"He has taken everything—*everything*!" she excitedly made answer.

"Everything?" I repeated, almost without knowing that I spoke at all.

"Every farthing of money I possessed he has carried away with him," she proceeded, with a sort of helpless desperation in her tone; "even the house I lived in he privately sold over my head. Yes, and the very furniture, too; and at the present moment I am—a beggar!"

As she said this I staggered back to my seat, just as if I had received a deadly blow. I made no attempt to comfort this poor miserable woman, whose crushed and wounded spirit needed so sadly a loving healing hand; I was not even capable of uttering a word, so terrible and startling had been the shock, so entirely different from anything which I had anticipated.

By-and-by I became conscious that Mrs. Green was regarding me with a kind of wistful wonder through her tears, as if mutely reproaching me for my apparent lack of sympathy.

Ah! she little knew the hard rebellious thoughts which were surging wildly through my brain at that very moment; the struggle which was taking place within me. Outwardly I may have seemed calm—I believe I did—but inwardly, ah me! I was going through one of those sharp, though short, experiences, which do not come often in a man's life-time, and when they *do* come, "a minute's agony appears a day!"

I do not, of course, expect that *all* my readers will be able to understand, far less sympathise with me in this particular phase

of my life's history. How, indeed, could they, unless they had gone through something similar?—or at least been conscious of the stirrings of a like ambition as that which fired my own mind, and made it simple torture for me to contemplate for a single moment the bare possibility of my having to relinquish all those long-indulged and fondly cherished visions with regard to the future which had become interwoven with my very being, and to accomplish which I felt that I could cheerfully forego every other advantage which might be afforded me—comfort, ease, pleasure, or wealth—so firmly fixed were my resolves, so intense and absorbing my passion for study.

As it was, I saw my duty plainly enough ; the difficulty was to do it.

There was a furious battle between it and inclination.

“ The struggle between right and wrong
Was raging terrible and strong.”

How thankful I was afterwards that I had been fortified, as it were, by what I had gone through the preceding day ; braced up for trial, nerved for endurance !

Yes, like a gentle whisper from the

heavenlies came the soft comforting refrain across my agitated mind—" *Oh, rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him*"—and then the tumult ceased, the disturbing elements quietly subsided; and conscience-stricken and subdued, I proceeded to look my new position boldly in the face, and turn my tardy attention to the worse than widowed Mrs. Green.

"Dear mother, I can't tell you how sorry I am for you," I said, making a violent effort to speak in my natural tone.

"I thought you would be vexed," she answered hurriedly, her eyes, meanwhile, regarding me with a curious bewildered expression, as if she did not quite know what to make of my previous silence; "but I do not want you to trouble yourself about me, my dear," she added quickly, "as I have no doubt I shall easily be able to find some kind of occupation. You see, I am well known in the neighbourhood, and——"

"Now, mother, you mustn't talk like that," I interposed, with an air of forced cheerfulness; "just leave everything to me, and I will see that you are properly provided for."

“You?” she exclaimed, gazing at me in unaffected surprise; “why, Mr. Vaughan told me the other day that you would have barely enough to carry you through Oxford.”

“Ah, but since that I have come into quite a fortune,” I remarked, still in the same encouraging strain; “why, I have actually been offered three hundred pounds a year for doing next to nothing! It would be strange indeed, therefore, if *you* were to reap no advantage from it, after bringing me up and treating me just like your own son.”

Then I once more went over to her, stooped down and kissed the poor pale tearful face; after which, to prevent her asking any further questions until I should have had time to mature my plans, I told her I must leave her for a short time, as I wanted to convey a message to Mr. Whitworth; and in the meanwhile I insisted on her taking her bonnet off, and comfortably establishing herself on the little well-worn leather-covered sofa until my return.

This done, I hurried away to the college, and having succeeded in getting a brief pencilled note given into Mr. Whitworth's hands, asking him not to answer Sir Stafford

Stafford's letter until he had again spoken to me on the subject, I retraced my steps to the house, relieved at having accomplished the first step towards getting matters put upon a definite footing between myself and Sir Stafford's son.

Subsequently, I set myself the somewhat difficult and delicate task of trying to ascertain from Mrs. Green the exact amount of which she had been despoiled ; and also the precise terms which herself and her husband had been lately on ; and, as far as she knew them, the particular nature of his plans, so that I might form some idea as to the possible chances of her ever again hearing or seeing anything of him.

From the information she gave me, I plainly perceived that her first version of the case was only too correct.

He certainly *had* deserted her, and worse than that, there could be no manner of doubt as to his having, previous to his departure, disposed of her house and furniture, carrying off the proceeds, along with the rest of her little property.

He had made his arrangements with his usual craftiness, allowing his poor wife to

suspect nothing until it was too late ; and when he finally left her, it was with the avowed intention of proceeding to a neighbouring town, for the purpose of making inquiries regarding a certain scholastic engagement which he pretended he was about to enter into, instead of which he, of course, never went near the place, but made the best of his way to Liverpool, from whence he at once set sail for Australia, his passage having long ago been taken under an assumed name, and all contingencies provided against with the aid and co-operation of one of his like-minded Saltsea acquaintances, who, for reasons best known to himself, had made up his mind to accompany him in his travels.

It was through this man's relations that Mrs. Green had in the first instance learnt the particulars of her husband's flight, and she had also to go through the ordeal of hearing him denounced in no measured terms, as having been the means, not only of inflicting injury upon *her*, but also indirectly on themselves, by encouraging another and better man than himself (this is the way *they* put it), to follow his own bad example.

After hearing everything there was to hear, and being convinced beyond the possibility of doubt that the truant husband had in very deed already left the English shores, thus putting it entirely out of our power to obtain anything in the shape of redress, I came to the conclusion that the best thing I could do would be to accompany her to Saltsea, for the purpose of arranging matters with the view to her future comfort.

First of all, however, I waited to consult Mr Whitworth on the subject, and to ask him whether it was quite a settled thing that the option of accepting or rejecting the post of travelling companion to Sir Stafford Stafford's son really and truly rested with myself, or whether there was a chance of my not being considered eligible after a personal interview.

In answer to this very natural inquiry, Mr. Whitworth handed me the baronet's letter, which was quite sufficiently conclusive to satisfy all my scruples, and make me feel as if the appointment in question was already, if I choose to agree to the terms, virtually my own.

There was one clause in the letter which astonished me greatly at first, but when I had time to become accustomed to the idea I seized upon it with the greatest avidity, as being the means of assisting me most materially in my plans for Mrs. Green, and enabling me at once to lighten the most pressing of her difficulties, and launch her forth upon her new life in comparative ease and comfort. The clause to which I allude consisted of nothing more nor less than the somewhat uncommon proposal, that if I acceded to Sir Stafford's request, and undertook the charge of his son, he would himself pay me my first year's income in advance.

"Rather an unusual suggestion to make, is it not?" observed Mr. Whitworth, with a half smile, when I called his attention to this part of the letter.

"Do you think he really means it?" I asked, with ill-suppressed anxiety.

"Oh yes, that's just like Sir Stafford," was the unhesitating rejoinder; "he never does things quite like other people, and in this case," he added, kindly, laying his hand lightly upon my arm as he spoke, "he has heard such a favourable report of your

talents and general efficiency, and is, moreover, so evidently afraid lest you should decline his offer, upon the plea of its being too great a sacrifice to give up your chances of preferment after leaving Oxford, that he would probably agree to almost any terms you might choose to propose."

"Then do you think there would be any harm in my taking advantage of the offer he has made?" I asked, feeling, and no doubt looking, rather embarrassed; "so far I mean," I added hastily, "as allowing him to pay me six months in advance?"

"You had better let it stand just as he has himself put it, and draw for the whole year," was the perfectly serious reply. "He will be greatly pleased at the idea of your being a fixture for at any rate that length of time; and with regard to all the arrangements, you can just leave them to me. I'll see to everything with pleasure."

"Thank you, you are very kind," I answered gratefully.

"Not at all," was his hasty disclaimer, and his grave eyes were fixed upon my face with an expression which I had on some few rare

occasions noticed before ; “ I am interested in you, and have been ever since I knew you, not only on your account, but also because you sometimes remind me of a dream of my youth, some one I loved and lost long years ago.”

He spoke slowly and dreamily, almost as if the words were forced from him by some motive power stronger than his own ; and as I gazed wonderingly into his usually impassive countenance, I was fairly startled at the emotion depicted on it.

Almost without knowing what I did in the excitement of the moment, I touched his arm, saying agitatedly :

“ Could you not tell me who it is of whom I remind you ? Oh, I would give the world if I could only obtain the smallest clue to my own identity.”

“ No, my dear boy—no,” he hurriedly rejoined, a quick spasm of pain contracting his face ; “ not even to please you could I rake up the ashes of my dead past ; the torture would be too exquisite. It has been a sealed book too long to make me anxious to open it again ; while as for yourself, no possible good *could* be effected by my making the attempt.”

“But have you any idea who I am?” I asked, breathlessly.

“No,” he answered, with a little start, as if surprised at the question; and once more the thoughtful dark eyes were riveted upon my face, “and yet sometimes—but no! God forbid!” and with a low quivering sigh he turned away, and pressed his lips firmly together, as if fully resolved on letting the subject drop.

And no subsequent endeavours on my part could induce him again to renew it, or give me one scrap more information than he had already done.

He showed himself most kind and tenderly sympathetic with regard to Mrs. Green, and seemed to guess, without being told, precisely what my feelings must be, and the motives which had actuated me in thus suddenly relinquishing the idea of going to Oxford.

It almost seemed, in fact, from the peculiarity of his conduct, and the delicate way in which he alluded to the affair, as if he had in some way or other become acquainted with Mr. Green’s flight, and his poor wife’s forlorn condition, at the very moment when he had first announced to me Sir Stafford Stafford’s

proposal. If so, this would, of course, account for his wishing to give me time to reconsider my determination, before sending off a final answer to the baronet's letter ; as knowing how deeply indebted I must ever consider myself to the kind-hearted woman who had for so many years stood to me in the place of a mother, and being, moreover, by this time pretty well acquainted with my character and disposition, he must have been perfectly aware that I would never, under any circumstances, allow her to be dependent upon other people for assistance, so long as I had it in my own power to provide for her.

As to her being able to support herself, it was quite out of the question. She had not sufficient strength of mind to enable her to grapple with actual poverty on the one hand, or real *bona fide* work on the other. She possessed, in fact, one of those easy-going quiescent natures, which, unless judiciously dealt with in early youth, and taught the importance of self-exertion, can rarely afterwards be trained or developed into anything like energy or vigour ; and though she might just at present fancy that she had both

strength and courage sufficient to undertake anything that might be required of her, she would speedily have discovered her mistake, and awoke to the realisation of her own helplessness.

When once I was able to think calmly and dispassionately over what had occurred, I saw reason for great thankfulness.

Yes, God had been very good to me ; *first* in permitting this trouble to come *before*, instead of *after* I had commenced my Oxford career, and *secondly*, in putting me in the way of obtaining so advantageous an appointment—so far as pecuniary remuneration went—just when I stood so sorely in need of it ; and although I cannot for one moment pretend to deny that I still suffered the keenest disappointment, whenever I remembered my now useless scholarship, and the various other distinctions I had gained under the fond impression that I should, ere long, be in a position to reap the full advantage of them, yet I must have been heartless and ungrateful in the extreme had I not, at the same time, been conscious of another sentiment, a feeling of pleasure and satisfaction in being able to afford practical assistance to one

who stood so much in need of it as poor Mrs. Green.

True, my visionary dreams of intellectual greatness had suddenly melted into thin air—for I had a sort of instinctive prevision that my new post would give me very little time or opportunity for anything in the shape of literary work—I stood, as it were, subdued, baffled, bewildered, discouraged—

“A fond, aspiring candidate no more.”

I felt like one

“Who, journeying, checks the rein in haste,
Because a chasm doth yawn across his way ;
Too wide for leaping, and too steeply faced,
For climber to essay.”

And yet—does it seem far-fetched and contradictory?—I was at the same time conscious of a degree of peace such as I had never enjoyed before ; a new-born sense of restfulness and tranquillity, which had the effect of raising me to a different level to that which I had formerly occupied, and made me begin to doubt whether this trial may not have been intended to teach me a

lesson which I needed to learn ; whether that ambition which had hitherto urged me forward with unflagging energy, and made me so eagerly anxious to overleap all obstacles, and overcome all difficulties, was, indeed, heaven directed, or whether, in short, it may not have been of the earth, earthy ; and as such, rather to be eschewed than encouraged—rather to be looked upon as a stumbling-block towards the attainment of nobler and loftier things—at the best a doubtful good, while it *might* possibly turn out a decided evil.

These were some of the thoughts which now and again crossed my mind, puzzling in themselves, yet becoming by degrees clearer and more defined as my new position appeared before me in a less strange and unsatisfactory light ; and, remembering that :

“That work which is begun well is half done,
And without prayer no work is well begun ;”

I humbly strove to take up this fresh responsibility in a cheerful and unrepining spirit, determined to do my duty, whether it quite coincided with my own individual

pleasure or not, and waste no time in vain regrets and idle musings over that which—

“Might have been, yet might not be.”

CHAPTER III.

A CHANGED DESTINY.

“I will go forth ’mong men, not mailed in scorn,
But in the armour of a pure intent;
Great duties are before me.”

“Where is the troubled heart consign’d to share
Tumultuous toils, or solitary care,
Unblest by visionary thoughts that stray
To count the joys of Fortune’s better day?”

THE first important step I took on arriving at Saltsea was to have an interview with the person to whom Mr. Green had assigned his wife’s house and furniture, for the purpose of ascertaining whether there was any chance of my being able to induce him to allow her to retain possession of it.

I commenced my negotiations, feeling, I must confess, not very sanguine as to the result; as it seemed upon the face of it

rather an unreasonable thing to propose to the purchaser, whoever he might be, that he should forego his claim in favour of its present occupier.

When it came to the point, however, I found it easier than I had anticipated to persuade him into letting me return the money he had paid for the furniture; while as for the house, he finally agreed upon accepting the offer I made him, and permitting Mrs. Green to occupy it as a yearly tenant. The fact was, he had been so thoroughly deceived by the *ci-devant* school-master's plausible misrepresentations as to his reasons for disposing of the property, and was so shocked and horrified when he discovered the true state of the case, that he was far more ready than he would probably otherwise have been to accede to my wishes, and do everything in his power by way of facilitating matters with regard to the future comfort and convenience of the poor deserted wife.

It was a Mr. Benson to whom Mr. Green had sold the house—a respectable farmer, who lived a few miles from Saltsea, and had not the most remote idea of the peculiar

circumstances under which the purchase was really made. The two had met quite by chance some few weeks previously, and Mr. Benson having casually mentioned that he was on the look-out for a modest little abode, within easy distance of the sea, the crafty schoolmaster had instantly taken advantage of the opportunity of suggesting that he should, before going further, look at this particular house, and see whether it would be likely to suit him.

The time fixed upon for him to examine it was one Sunday morning while Mrs. Green was at church, so that she knew nothing of the stranger's visit, and had not therefore the faintest suspicion of her husband's plans.

Mr. Benson was given to understand by the latter that Mrs. Green was going away with her husband, but that she was so much attached to her old home that she could not as yet bear the idea of seeing it in the occupation of another, although she was perfectly convinced of the expediency of its being sold; so that if the worthy farmer had even come across her while the arrangement was pending, he would probably, out

of delicacy for her feelings, have refrained from mentioning the tabooed subject in her presence.

As it happened, however, he never saw her at all ; and his surprise was only equalled by his indignation when he discovered the true state of the case, and became for the first time cognizant of Mr. Green's unprincipled conduct.

Not until I had come to a satisfactory agreement with Mr. Benson, and received from him a kind and cordial assurance that the unfortunate wife should be allowed to retain possession of her old home so long as she felt disposed to occupy it, did I inform her of my plans with regard to her. I had been so apprehensive lest my efforts in this direction should fail, that I carefully refrained from raising her expectations, until I had some tangible grounds for supposing that these expectations would be fulfilled ; so I listened to all her vague suggestions as to where she should go, and what she should do, on leaving her old home, without bringing forward any objections, or demurring to the wildest and most impracticable of her schemes, though I was all the time hoping that things

would turn out differently to what she so evidently expected.

When at length my business transactions with Mr. Benson had been brought to a successful termination, and I found myself in a position to announce the good news to Mrs. Green, not as a mere doubtful probability, but as an already established fact, her consequent delight was very great. If indeed I had wanted anything in the shape of reward for the sacrifice I had made in relinquishing my own plans for her sake, I should have been amply repaid by witnessing the air of relief with which she proceeded to re-settle herself in her old home, and fall peacefully back into her former habits, just as if no Mr. Green had ever appeared upon the scene to throw the glamour of his deceitful flatteries around her, preparatory to getting her into his toils, and paving the way towards the end he doubtless had in view, of enriching himself at her expense.

When I had done all I could for her, cheered her up to the best of my power, and made arrangements whereby she should regularly receive a certain proportion of my own income, I took leave of her, and went to

spend a day or two at the vicarage before joining Mr. Stafford in London, from whence we were to proceed on our travels.

Kind-hearted Mr. Maxwell had died suddenly—about a year previously—of heart complaint, accelerated, the doctors said, by an accident which had happened to him while driving in his little hooded phaeton to visit a patient at some distance from Saltsea, just as it was growing dark one stormy evening.

I had not, therefore, the pleasure of seeing *his* friendly face during this hurried visit to the neighbourhood of my boyish home, and I missed him more than I could express, so invariably kind had he been to myself, so unselfishly good-natured, so ready with his advice, when advice was wanted, so quick to recognise and appreciate any good point in one's nature, and speak a word of encouragement just at the right moment and in the right spirit.

I had only fallen in with Mr. Vaughan once during my stay with Mrs. Green, but I wrote to him, as in duty bound, announcing my own change of plans, and mentioning the

reason why I had been obliged to forego my former hopes, and content myself with so different a sphere to that which I had for so long a time been looking forward to; and in reply he expressed himself as being exceedingly sorry and disappointed at the unexpected turn which things had taken, but left it to my own discretion to follow whatever course appeared to me the wisest and most advisable to be adopted.

Having thus received his tacit permission to act up to my own ideas as to the particular line of conduct which it behoved me to pursue, I had no further hesitation in completing my bargain with Mr. Benson, and adhering to the semi-engagement I had entered into with Sir Stafford Stafford on behalf of his son; and as the latter was getting very impatient to recommence his travels, which had been interrupted by a temporary fit of illness (the nature of which I was at the time quite ignorant of, although subsequently I became only too well familiarised with it), I had a very limited period allotted to me for getting through my own preparations, and could not possibly spare more than a couple of days—and those I obtained with

difficulty—for paying a farewell visit to the vicarage.

I would fain have prolonged this visit if I could, as I had not the most remote idea how long a time might elapse before I should again have an opportunity of seeing my Saltsea friends; and besides——well, I will confess the truth! my infatuation for the vicar's young daughter remained unabated, and nothing would have given me greater satisfaction than to have been permitted the privilege of spending a few weeks or months, as the case might be, in her fascinating society.

Reluctantly, however, I was obliged to tear myself away from her, and I fancied—it might of course be *only* fancy, but I certainly fancied—she seemed for her part sorry to say good-bye.

Nothing could be kinder than Mr. Vaughan's behaviour on this particular occasion. If I had been his own son he could scarcely have treated me with more affectionate consideration. Over and over again he charged me not to allow myself to be influenced by mere monetary considerations, but frankly to let him know if the position I was about to

occupy should prove in any way distasteful or uncongenial to myself.

“I cannot say that *I* am altogether satisfied with the account which Sir Stafford Stafford gives of his son,” he confidentially observed to me the night before I started for London; “and it is just possible that you may find him more unmanageable than you anticipate, in which case do not forget that my purse is always at your service to free you from any real or imaginary sense of obligation you may have incurred in thus accepting their offer. Considering the peculiar circumstances under which that offer was made,” he went on, in a slow reflective tone, “I quite agree with you that you could scarcely have done otherwise than accept it”—it was the first time he had ever, in so many words, admitted so much—“but you would, I think, be perfectly justified in relinquishing the engagement, in the event of its turning out a different style of thing to what you have been led to expect.”

“I look upon myself as bound to them for at any rate a year,” I answered, thinking as I spoke of the three hundred pounds which had been duly paid through Mr. Whitworth.

“Well, I don’t quite see that,” objected the clergyman.

“Whatever happens, however,” I hastily continued, “I shall carry with me the recollection of all your kindness; and if I should stand in need of further help, I shall not hesitate to apply to you for it.”

“That’s right,” heartily ejaculated Mr. Vaughan, his grave features instantaneously unbending, while he put out his hand and warmly grasped mine; “you could not do me a greater favour than by taking me at my word, and giving me the chance of being practically kind to one in whom I am so much interested as yourself.”

“I think you have had many such chances,” I feelingly remarked; “where indeed should I have been at this present moment but for your goodness and generosity?”

“And where, if we come to talk in that strain, should *I* have been,” he exclaimed, in a voice of uncontrollable emotion, “but for your bravery and courage, which enabled you—boy though you were—to save a life so much dearer and more precious to me than my own?”

“Oh, have you not forgotten that *yet*?” I

cried, feeling really uncomfortable at the idea of this boyish feat of mine being still remembered and talked of; "you must know that it was a mere chance—an accident."

"You may call it chance or accident, or anything you like," replied Mr. Vaughan, without allowing me to continue my sentence, "but so far as myself and my daughter are concerned, I look upon it as a special providence."

"And as such, no credit is due to me, or anyone else," I reminded him.

"That may be, and yet we cannot but be grateful to the instrument," he quickly responded.

I shook my head rather dubiously, and he went on, in a voice which trembled with emotion :

"To tell you the honest truth, Charlie,"—most of my friends still continued to call me Charlie, knowing my decided preference for the only name which I felt I could, properly speaking, lay claim to—"I am afraid Laura is my idol; for I have often felt as if my own life would be an utterly valueless possession to me if anything were to happen to her. She is all I have, you see," he added,

an expression of mingled pride and affection crossing his face; "so it is not after all so very wonderful that I should set such store by her."

"No, indeed, it is the most natural thing in the world!" I assented; and then I stopped, and looked rather anxiously at him, not quite knowing whether he might not consider the eager warmth of my manner slightly out of place.

But there were no signs of disapproval on his face, only a smile of gratification and self-complacency; seeing which I took courage, and went on presently:

"It would be strange if you did *not* prize her."

"I've tried not to spoil her," he observed, more to himself than me, "but it's just useless! she makes me do whatever she likes."

It seemed so strange to hear the usually dignified and pompous-mannered clergyman speaking in this tone, and I could scarcely help smiling a little as I answered hastily:

"She is *not* spoilt—nothing would really spoil her; she is far too sensible and right-minded for that."

“Miss Belmont has been a great help in developing her character, I think,” was his next reflective rejoinder, “and turning her impulses in a right direction.”

“Yes, she knows how to appreciate her,” I murmured, and then, with a half sigh, I shut my lips, and began to indulge in sundry melancholy reflections as to the possible changes which might take place in the subject of our remarks before I should again make my appearance at the vicarage.

Already I had been struck by the very marked advances which she had made under Miss Belmont’s instruction, and now she had, besides, the benefit of the best masters, who came from Middlebury two or three times a week for the express purpose of finishing the work which the other had so ably begun, and up to the present time carried on, without requiring the help of any one—masculine or otherwise—whose talents and attainments were superior to her own.

Now, she was really glad to avail herself of the aid of these Middlebury professors, as her pupil had arrived at that particular stage when she felt she could not, without other assistance, do her justice; as she did not

herself profess to possess all the requisites and recommendations in the way of accomplishments, etc., which could enable her to carry out the *rôle* of a really competent finishing governess to so naturally clever a girl as Laura Vaughan undoubtedly was.

"By-the-bye, how about young Fortescue?" suddenly exclaimed the vicar's voice; "will he be able to manage without you, or must he get another tutor?"

"Oh, he will easily get on alone," I replied, coming suddenly out of my reverie; "even his father is satisfied with him now, I think, especially as Mr. Whitworth has promised to keep an occasional eye upon him himself, and give him a hint if he sees him likely to relapse into his old habits."

"You certainly contrived to acquire a most marvellous influence over him," was the somewhat curious response; "how on earth did you manage it?—so young as you were, too! I was perfectly amazed when I heard of it."

"He took a fancy to me almost from the first," I explained; "I suppose because I was the exact antipodes of himself. I cannot otherwise account for it."

“And then?”

“Then—well, he is the essence of good-nature, you know; so I worked upon that, and in the end carried my point.”

“What do you mean by saying you worked upon his good nature?” demanded Mr. Vaughan, regarding me with rather a puzzled expression.

“I just told him how I was situated,” was my simple reply; “plainly gave him to understand that it would be a decided advantage to myself if I *did* succeed in helping him on with his studies; but that if the thing turned out a failure, or even if he only made a partial progress, I should never consent to allow myself to be benefited by the terms which Mr. Whitworth had so generously proposed with regard to my board; and that I should in consequence be dependent upon you for everything.”

“A very original way of putting it, upon my word,” laughed the clergyman; “and do you mean to say it really had a good effect upon him?”

“Oh, yes; he exerted himself manfully, by way of showing that my confidence in him was not misplaced; and by thus appeal-

ing as it were to his generosity, I obtained an effectual hold upon him, and furnished him with a motive—which was the great thing he wanted—for trying to overcome his idle habits.”

“Did you tell Mr. Whitworth the secret of your success?”

“No, the result was quite enough for him, without entering into any of these particulars. Besides,” here I laughed softly, “I never had much time for talk, especially with him.”

“No, I suppose not,” acquiesced Mr. Vaughan; “the wonder is how you contrived to get through so much as you did, without being thoroughly knocked up.”

“I don’t think mere study would ever hurt me,” I answered enthusiastically; “I love it so—it almost seems my natural element;” and try as I would, I could not help feeling conscious of a slight twinge, as I suddenly remembered my changed destiny.

“I suppose you will see Mr. Whitworth to-morrow?”

“I hope so, for a few minutes,” I replied rather absently; “I must go to his house for my luggage.”

“He is a fine fellow!” remarked the vicar, in a tone of unmistakable sincerity, “and does many a good deed without anyone’s being the wiser for it.”

“Excuse me, but you have known him for a long time, I think,” I exclaimed, a sudden longing coming across me to try to find out from him whether there was—there *could* be—a chance of Mr. Whitworth having a sort of vague guess as to my probable parentage.

“Yes, I knew him when we were boys together,” was the reply, uttered in rather an amazed tone; “why?”

“Oh, you will think me very stupid and absurd,” I hurriedly explained, “but on several occasions I have noticed him looking at me so strangely, as if trying to trace out a resemblance in my face to someone whom he had formerly known; and the other day he actually confessed that I *did* remind him of someone; but when I begged him to tell me who it was, thinking it might perhaps give me a clue to my identity, he became very much agitated, talked about the torture of recalling the past, and seemed altogether so put out, that I had no option but to let

the subject drop. Now, however, it just occurred to me that you might know something of his past history, which would account for ——”

“My dear boy, what an extraordinary fancy to have got into your head!” interrupted the astounded vicar; “I assure you,” he continued, in a kind, serious tone, “there’s nothing whatever in Mr. Whitworth’s past life to warrant you in supposing that it bears ever so remote a connection with your own.”

“I did not quite mean to imply that,” I quickly rejoined.

“As for the resemblance of which he talks,” pursued the clergyman, in the voice of one who gives utterance to a simple fact regarding which there can be no doubt, “it must be a chance—a mere coincidence, such as often happens.”

“But why should he dislike to tell me who it is——”

“Ah, that is quite another question,” said Mr. Vaughan, shrugging his shoulders; “we have all got our little oddities, you know, and Mr. Whitworth was never considered a communicative man, even so far as his best friends were concerned.”

“But doesn’t that very fact——” I commenced, when my older and more sceptical friend cut me short by saying:

“I know the inference you would draw; but there is not one shred of evidence to show that he ever *had* any such great trouble as that to which you seem to think he made allusion. My own idea on the subject is, that his life has been a singularly uneventful one, not even marked by anything in the way of a serious illness—to say nothing of other forms of trial—except *once*,” this was evidently an afterthought; “let me see,” stroking his chin reflectively, “it must be twenty years ago or more; I remember he was at Oxford at the time, and the illness I mean was a bad attack of brain fever, which threatened his life.”

“Brain fever—twenty years ago!” I repeated, with frantic eagerness, just like a drowning man catching at a straw.

“Over-study did it!” sententiously announced the vicar, as if determined to make good his case, “and that was the one solitary instance I ever knew of his having anything the matter with him.”

I was silenced, but not convinced. The

mention of this serious illness seemed somehow to strengthen my former doubts, and make me inclined to connect it with that past, the ashes of which Mr. Whitworth had declared himself so unwilling to rake up.

"As you appear to regard the matter so seriously, however, I'll tell you what I'll do," suddenly observed Mr. Vaughan, with the air of one who has hit upon some course of action which must perforce prove eminently satisfactory; "the very next time I see Whitworth I will broach the matter, and tell you what he says."

"It won't be so much what he says, as how he looks," I significantly reminded him.

"All right, I'll pay particular attention to his looks as well as his words," was the good-humoured assurance; and after a few minutes the conversation drifted into another channel.

When I came to take a private mental survey of what had occurred, I was rather glad than otherwise that I had acted upon this sudden impulse which made me resolve, entirely on the spur of the moment, on telling Mr. Vaughan just what my feelings were on this—to me—most important of subjects. Not that I expected much in the way of

results : on the contrary, I had a sort of instinctive consciousness—such as I think rarely deceives one in these cases—that so far as I was myself personally concerned, no satisfactory information would be elicited from Mr. Whitworth, or anyone else, which might for an instant be calculated to set my mind at rest, or clear up the mystery of my birth.

Still, it was surely my duty to leave no stone unturned towards bringing about this desirable end if possible, and I had every confidence in Mr. Vaughan's wisdom and prudence, and felt, moreover, that if *anyone* could pierce through the other's reserve, and induce him to refer to that page in his life's history which was at present sealed to everyone but himself, he—the vicar—was the man to do it.

CHAPTER IV.

FATHER AND SON.

“Of all the numerous ills that hurt our peace,
That press the soul, or wring the mind with anguish,
Beyond comparison the worst are those
That to our folly or our guilt we owe.”

“It needs
The intuitive decision of a bright
And thorough-edged intellect to part
Error from crime.”

EARLY the following morning I started for Middlebury *en route* for London, where I arrived just as it was getting dusk that same evening.

According to an arrangement which had previously been entered into between Sir Stafford Stafford and myself, I drove at once to the Clarendon Hotel, where I alighted and asked for the baronet.

My luggage was taken instant possession of, and I was conducted to a private sitting-room, and after waiting there just for the space of a few minutes Sir Stafford made his appearance.

A tall, slight, gentlemanly looking man, with long white hair, a pleasant, though harassed expression of countenance, keen black eyes, and a frank good-humoured mouth—this was the baronet.

He came up to me with outstretched hands, greeting me as cordially as if he had known me for years, and then politely asked me to be seated.

This little ceremony concluded he looked at me, and I at him.

Apparently his investigation was satisfactory, for he gave a sigh of evident relief, and leaning complacently back in his chair, remarked conclusively :

“ I have all along had the impression that you would turn out the right man in the right place, and now I am sure of it.”

“ You have scarcely had time to judge of my capabilities as yet,” I modestly reminded him.

“ No, but I like your face,” was his candid

rejoinder, "it is grave and earnest, and shows me that you have plenty of strength of character, which is the thing of all others you will need the most in your intercourse with my poor son."

He glanced at me with a half conscious, half embarrassed air as he said this, and I suddenly bethought myself of the peculiarly significant way in which Mr. Vaughan had alluded to this son, and the doubts he had expressed as to whether I should not find my future position a more onerous and responsible one than I anticipated.

I made no remark, however, but waited somewhat anxiously for the baronet's explanation.

"I suppose Mr. Whitworth showed you my first letter?" he observed, after a brief pause, "the one, I mean, in which I made you the offer which you have done me the honour to accept."

I answered, of course, in the affirmative.

"In that case you will be, to a certain extent, prepared for the announcement which I regret to have to make with regard to my son's—" he hesitated for a moment, during

which, a stern set look came over the thin white face, then went on hurriedly—"well, there is no use in beating about the bush, sooner or later you must know it—dissipated habits."

"You mentioned in your letter that he was not quite so steady as could be wished," I replied, quoting his very words.

"Ah, yes; I could not well be more explicit in writing, you know," he said, eyeing me rather solicitously, I thought, "especially before matters were settled, and I could not be at all sure whether you would agree to fall in with my suggestion. Now, however, I wish to treat you with perfect candour, and show you exactly the difficulties you will have to contend with, so that you may be prepared for every emergency, and know just what to expect."

This was certainly not a very promising beginning, and I could not help being conscious of a certain feeling of uneasiness, a sort of gloomy apprehension lest I might find that I had entered into an engagement which it would be utterly out of my power to fulfil, and made myself responsible for far more than I should ever be able to undertake.

And as I listened to Sir Stafford Stafford's subsequent description of his son's occasional mode of conducting himself, the weak-mindedness which made him an easy prey to all sorts of unscrupulous and designing characters; the restlessness which prevented him from ever being able to settle down in any one place; the constant craving after some kind of excitement, the periodical fits of illness brought on by his own excesses, and many other things besides, I began to think that I had, somehow, made a mistake; and that, however good my intentions might be, I should never succeed in getting on with such an extraordinary character as, according to his father's showing, Mr. Stafford must be; and that for any practical benefit I could do him, I might just as well have remained away altogether.

"Now, having faithfully pointed out the dark side of the picture, and fairly frightened you with an account of the poor boy's misdoings, I will come to his redeeming points, which are comparatively very few," proceeded Sir Stafford, after regarding me with another penetrating glance, which told him probably something of what was passing in my mind.

“First of all he is fairly good-natured, and will do almost anything for a person he really likes. Then he does not get angry or offended when you tell him his faults; and there *are* even times when he is conscious of them himself, and is positively anxious to amend them, and if you will only take advantage of these occasions, there is just a chance that you may be able to do him good.”

“Is he allowed an unlimited supply of money?” I inquired, rather hesitatingly, for it appeared to me, from the way Sir Stafford had been speaking, that there was no restriction whatever in this respect.

“Ah! that reminds me that I have not yet told you one important fact connected with my son’s history,” was the quick response; “most unfortunately for himself, he came in for a comfortable little fortune when he was only sixteen; and as the money was left him unconditionally, and subject to no one’s control except his own, you may judge how much harm it has done him. It had, in fact, the effect of completely unsettling him, and has been a positive curse to him.”

"What a pity," I exclaimed in all sincerity, for I could well understand how injuriously the possession of wealth might act upon a character like his, all unformed and undeveloped as it must have been when first he realised his true position as being no longer dependent upon his father.

"Yes, it has completely ruined his life for him," sorrowfully acknowledged the baronet. "Under other circumstances I *might* have made something of him; but this sudden accession to the dignity of independence, just when he needed a strict hand to keep him well under control, produced such a disastrous effect upon his undisciplined mind that he threw off all restraint, and soon began to give way to those unfortunate habits of which I have been telling you, and which, unless they are soon checked, will, I fear, consign him, ere long, to an early grave, so naturally delicate is his constitution, and so little real strength has he to cope with anything in the shape of a serious illness."

There was a ring of intense pain in the old man's voice as he thus concluded his melancholy recital, and I felt strangely

moved as I thought of the terrible trial it must be to him to see his only son apparently bent on self-destruction, without being able to do aught towards averting the threatened catastrophe, or bringing about a better and more satisfactory state of things with regard to the mode and manner of his life.

Mingled with the hopelessness which I was still conscious of, as I reflected upon the discouraging nature of the task which had been assigned to myself, there was now another feeling ; a vague wish to help, if I only knew how, this kindly-mannered, courteous, but unhappy stranger, who had treated me with so much confidence, and seemed to depend so entirely upon me, taking it quite for granted that I should do my best for his misguided son, and being apparently not altogether without hope as to the result.

Under these circumstances, what could I do except make up mind that I would accept my fate, and see whether, by making a vigorous effort in the way of self-exertion, I might not be successful in acquiring some sort of influence over my future companion ? —and if I could not prevail on him to discontinue his evil practices altogether, try at

least to make them appear before him in their true colours, and in this way prepare the way for something more satisfactory in the time to come ?

“Is Mr. Stafford quite satisfied with the arrangement you have made with me ?” I inquired presently.

“Perfectly,” was the unhesitating rejoinder ; “the only thing he fears is lest you should, to use his own expression, give him up when you hear what a black sheep he is.”

“I think, if you will excuse me for venturing an opinion,” I remarked, after I had considered the matter a little, “it would be better for him not to know the extent of the information you have given me regarding him.”

“Just as you please,” replied Sir Stafford, looking slightly mystified.

“Of course I do not for a moment pretend to dictate,” I went on apologetically, “as I am sure you must know best : only, it just occurred to me that if he were to fancy I knew *everything*, it would have a sort of hardening effect upon him, and make him, out of bravado perhaps, go on as wildly as ever ; but if, on the contrary, he were to

have the idea that I thought him better than he really is, he might, you know—so it seems to me—for a time at least hesitate about doing anything to forfeit my good opinion, and in this way there is a remote chance of my being able eventually to influence him.”

“Upon my word I believe you are right!” energetically returned the baronet; “give a person a bad name, and ten to one he’ll do his best to deserve it! Yes, yes, your plan is the best one; take it as a matter of course that he’s steady, and all that sort of thing, and perhaps he may so far take the hint as to remain, for a while at least, on his good behaviour.”

“We will hope so, at any rate,” I replied, far more cheerfully than I felt.

“He is not yet aware of your arrival, as I gave my man orders to come direct to myself as soon as your presence was announced. Perhaps, however, I had better let him know that you are here; unless, indeed—how forgetful I am!” here he turned most kindly towards me, “you will of course like some refreshment after your journey?” And going over to the bell, he was about to ring it,

when I interposed by telling him that I had already dined.

"But surely you will allow me to order you something?" he recommenced, and then he suddenly came to a full stop, for the door was at that moment unceremoniously opened, and the object of our late discussion slowly sauntered into the room.

I fancied he glanced rather suspiciously from one to the other, as he came forward and held out his hand to myself; but if so, he could have seen nothing to indicate that the terms we were on were in any wise more confidential than what might be expected to exist between a civilly disposed host and his guest.

"I was just going to send and let you know of Mr. Hale's arrival, Edmund," observed the baronet, in the most natural and matter-of-fact tones, "only I wanted him to let me order him some refreshment first."

"Thank you, but indeed I would rather not have anything just now," I earnestly assured him, and then I proceeded to direct my attention to the new-comer.

He had changed very much since last I

had seen him at Fortescue Hall, and I had some difficulty in recognising him as the mere stripling whom I had on two or three occasions met, though without holding any more intercourse than exchanging half a dozen words with him.

Apparently *I* had altered too, for after regarding me for a few seconds with an expression of comical dismay, he said laughingly :

“I declare you have grown quite a giant.”

“Not so bad as that, I hope,” was my amused reply, “but I certainly must plead guilty to being tall.”

“Tall ! I should think so !” he exclaimed, as he flung himself down upon a chair and fixed his restless blue eyes upon my face ; “and when you *are* about it, you may as well add *old*, for you don’t look a day under thirty.”

“I am glad to hear it,” I responded, in an off-hand, careless tone ; “it will give me a certain claim upon you which you might not be otherwise willing to acknowledge.”

“What sort of a claim ?” he demanded, with a fleeting look of curiosity.

“Respect !” I promptly explained ; “if I

looked too young, you know, you might feel disposed to regard me with a kind of contemptuous indifference, which would prove very humiliating to my self-esteem."

"Respect is a quality I am lamentably deficient in," he retorted, in a tone between jest and earnest, "as the governor," glancing meaningly at his father, "knows to his cost."

"Oh, well, never mind about that," was the latter's hastily encouraging remark; "you may improve perhaps as time moves on."

"Really!" and the light eyes distended in affected amazement; "I had no idea that you considered there was even a *possibility* of improvement! You certainly never admitted so much before in my presence, but always seemed, on the contrary, to regard me as utterly worthless and irreclaimable."

"Nonsense, Edmund, what is the use of giving yourself such a bad character?" said Sir Stafford, after glancing imperceptibly at me, as if to call my attention to the fact that he was mindful of the suggestion I had so lately ventured to make on that very subject; "just leave Mr. Hale to find out your faults for himself."

“So that is the *rôle* we are to follow, is it?” sarcastically observed Mr. Stafford; “quite a new move on your part, I should say,” and he smiled mockingly. “I was fully prepared to find you pouring into Mr. Hale’s virtuous ears a plain and unvarnished account of all my numerous sins and transgressions; piously warning him against being contaminated by my bad example, and praying and beseeching him to put forth all his efforts to rescue me from my perilous condition; and lo and behold! I discover you, instead, trying to smooth the poor fellow’s path for him, by keeping all my vices out of sight, leaving them to crop up one by one, instead of running the risk of completely disheartening him by mustering them in all their formidable array before his horrified imagination.”

“Are you so *very* much worse than the generality of people?” I inquired, taking pains to speak and look as naturally as possible.

“Ask the governor,” he curtly replied, darting a glance of semi-defiance in the direction of his unfortunate father.

“But don’t you think,” I objected, “that

in these particular cases a man is his own best judge ?”

“How do you make that out ?” quickly inquired Mr. Stafford, while a doubtful perplexed expression overspread the baronet’s face.

“Other people only see our actions, but we ourselves know, or ought to know, the motives from which these actions spring ; and it is not, after all, so much what we really do which constitutes our guilt, as the spirit in which we do it.”

“Well, I can quite understand that it is possible to perform actions which in themselves are really meritorious from an unworthy motive,” remarked Sir Stafford ; “but it never occurred to me before that the converse might be the case : how is it possible, for instance, for a man to do evil and yet be actuated by a right and proper spirit ?”

“May he not have noble aspirations through it all ?” I inquired rather diffidently, for it seemed very presumptuous of me, I thought, to venture to bring forward my own theories in apparent opposition to those of a man so much older and more experienced than myself ; “and perhaps at the very time

we blame him the most, he may be the least deserving of it, as we can never tell the struggle between right and wrong which may be going on within him, how sorely tried he may be, how eagerly wishful to choose the good and abandon the evil, and yet how weak and impotent in resisting temptation. It makes one think of what poor Burns says :

“ ‘What’s done we partly may compute,
But know not what’s resisted.’ ”

“Well, there’s certainly something in that,” thoughtfully acquiesced Sir Stafford ; “still, it does not do to deal too leniently with these sort of things, as it *might* have the effect of encouraging people in their wickedness.”

“I can assure you there’s no fear of my worthy father doing that,” suddenly volunteered Mr. Stafford, and an aggrieved, ill-used expression came over his face ; “almost ever since I can remember, he’s been dinning it into my head that I’m a disgrace to the family, a hardened abandoned wretch, and I don’t know what besides ! So far, therefore, he has done his duty by me, and will have

nothing to reproach himself for on that head."

"Well, I think it is a father's duty to deal faithfully with his son," I gravely responded, "and perhaps you will thank him one day for all the good advice he has no doubt given you."

"Indeed, yes—there's no saying; strange things do happen in this oddly managed world," was the sceptical reply; "I'm afraid, though, it will be rather a distant day," and he shook his head with an incredulous movement.

"I am afraid so, too," quietly agreed Sir Stafford, as he rose from his seat and prepared to leave us together, "for there are certainly no present signs of its approach."

"Now tell me honestly what you think of me."

This was my companion's startlingly abrupt demand as soon as the door had closed upon his father.

"I have not had time to form an opinion as yet," I smilingly made answer.

"Nonsense! those wonderful dark eyes of yours seem to take in everything in a moment," was the impatient rejoinder, "and have they not been actively employed in

dissecting me ever since I came into the room !”

“Quite unconsciously then, I can assure you ; I have merely been trying to satisfy myself as to your identity.”

“Had you any doubt on that subject ?” and he gazed at me with an air of indolent interest.

“I found some difficulty at first in believing that it was really you whom I met at Fortescue Hall. You have altered so much.”

“And not for the better !” he moodily parenthesised, “if all they tell me is true.”

“You see you were a mere boy then,” I went on, purposely ignoring this remark, “and now that you have grown to man’s estate, you must perforce be changed.”

“Yes, I suppose so ;” and a weary sigh escaped from his lips, as he once more leant listlessly back in his chair, and began absently to twist a magnificent diamond ring which he wore, round and round his little finger.

And while his eyes were thus averted from myself, I seized the opportunity to steal another glance at him—a glance which showed me an oval face with clear-cut regular features ; a pale delicate complexion ; thick

wavy brown hair, and a short moustache (several shades lighter than the hair) which covered the upper lip, and partially concealed a weak, vacillating and undecided mouth.

Strictly speaking, it was a decidedly handsome countenance, but it still bore unmistakable traces of the sharp attack of illness from which he had only just recovered ; and his eyes, which I have already described as being of the lightest shade of blue, though in certain lights they appeared grey, wore such a restless, dissatisfied expression, that I was insensibly reminded of that verse in the Bible which speaks of the wicked as being like the troubled sea which cannot rest : he was so manifestly miserable ; so gloomily ill-at-ease and uncomfortable ; suffering doubtless from that worst of all diseases a troubled conscience ; that, however strongly I might disapprove of his reckless and irregular mode of conducting himself, however I might blame him for his past ungodly life, and despise him for his blindness and infatuation in not being able to discriminate between the false and the true, I yet felt that he was at the same time greatly to be pitied ; his whole existence up to the present time having been

to all intents and purposes *wasted*; one great and obstinately persisted-in mistake; and though he might, and probably did, from time to time try to beguile himself into the pleasing delusion that he was happy, he was in reality, with all his wealth and independence, one of the most wretched creatures on God's fair earth! with no hope beyond the grave; nothing to look forward to when life's fitful fever should be over, its poor play ended—*nothing* but a sleep that “knows no waking” and a night “where dawn shall never break.”

CHAPTER V.

THE COMMENCEMENT OF MY DIFFICULTIES.

“Take Nature’s path and mad opinion leave.”

“Manlike is it to fall into sin,
Fiendlike is it to dwell therein,
Christlike is it for sin to grieve,
Godlike is it all sin to leave.”

“It was a merry company.”

DURING the next few days I made a study of Mr. Stafford’s character, in order to discover as near as possible what his idiosyncrasies really were, and what particular motives would be the most likely to influence him, in the event of my finding it necessary to remonstrate with him upon the very questionable way he was in the habit of spending his time, and the far from elevating

pursuits he was accustomed to follow when left to his own foolish devices.

I was particularly careful, however, not to allow him to have any suspicion of the subject which was thus occupying my own earnest attention, as it might have put him on his guard, and made him regard me with doubt and mistrust, instead of the kind and friendly feeling which he seemed at present inclined to entertain towards me.

It might also have made him less open and communicative in his manner, and brought about an air of embarrassment and constraint, had he been aware how carefully I weighed his every word ; how anxiously I scrutinised his looks ; with what concentrated intentness I listened to the account he gave of his former travels ; the description of his likes and dislikes ; his tastes, and occupations, and friendships ; the places he was most fond of frequenting, the style of books he preferred reading ; and a hundred other items which he spontaneously volunteered for my presumable amusement.

On one subject only did he maintain a discreet silence, and that was with respect to those occasional attacks of illness which he

had of late been subject to ; and I particularly observed that if by any chance his father alluded to them, he invariably made an effort to turn the conversation into another channel.

This showed, I thought, that he was not altogether case-hardened, but that he really had some sense of shame, and could not bear to be reminded, even in the kindest and most delicate manner, of the painful and humiliating position he had been more than once forced to occupy, by way of reaping in some slight measure the fruit of that which he had sown.

Now he was, to a certain extent, on his good behaviour, having received a very serious warning from the doctor who had recently attended him, as to the dangerous consequences which would be likely to ensue if he did not exercise more care and prudence with regard to himself, and give up those pernicious habits which were growing more and more confirmed, and would, he assured him, unless discontinued entirely, ruin his constitution, and prove the destruction alike of mind and body.

At first I found it almost impossible to

realise that Sir Stafford's pathetic story of his son's dissipation had not been overdrawn; he seemed so young, and so—in many ways—well-meaning and refined, that no one, to look at him, would for a moment suppose that there were times when the demon of intoxication was strong within him, and he became oblivious alike to decency and self-respect, the sorrowful regrets of his friends, and the coldly indifferent sneers of his enemies: all was in fact forgotten, so long as the brief madness lasted, and when it was over and he awoke to the consciousness of his fall, he sought the aid of other dissipations to drown thought, kill care, and satisfy the feverish craving after excitement: the restless longing which always prevented him from settling quietly down, or finding pleasure in those other and more harmless kind of amusements which, had he been differently constituted, might have sufficed to satisfy him.

We remained in London about a week. Then Sir Stafford took an affectionate, though somewhat melancholy, leave of his son, and returned to the rest of his family (consisting of a wife and two daughters) in

Lincolnshire, leaving us to proceed on our travels.

It was evidently a relief to my companion when his father had actually taken his departure ; for though he seemed after a fashion to be fond of him, there was no denying the fact that they did not get on together.

With the best and kindest intentions in the world, Sir Stafford would nevertheless often chafe and irritate his son to that extent that he could scarcely keep his temper. Sometimes indeed he did *not* keep it, but gave way to a petulant outburst which showed how little he could brook contradiction, and how unsafe it was for the two to be thrown too constantly together.

“The fact and truth is, the governor rubs me up the wrong way,” remarked Mr. Stafford the very first time we found ourselves alone after the baronet had gone ; “I don’t know how it is, I am sure ; he means well, I have no doubt, and yet somehow he always manages to say something or other to provoke me.”

“I fancy I could put up with almost anything from a person I really and truly cared for,” was my significant reply.

"Do you think so? well, perhaps you have never been tried," he slightly responded; "it's not pleasant, I can assure you," he went on rather ruefully, "to have all your weak points constantly thrown in your teeth."

"I suppose if he had less affection he would care less," I suggested; "it is always the case, I think, that the more fond we are of a person, the more keenly alive do we become to their faults."

"Whatever you do then, I pray and beseech you not to conceive a violent attachment for my unworthy self!" was the half-joking, half-serious reply, "for if there is one thing I detest more than another, it is to be constantly reminded of my misdeeds."

"I must try to bear that in mind," I answered, falling in with his humour, "but I trust I may have no excuse for doing anything of the kind."

"Ah, you little know me," he answered shortly.

"I don't by any means expect to find you perfect, if that is what you are afraid of," I smilingly rejoined, "we are none of us that; but we can all try to improve, I suppose."

“Oh, yes ; we can improve—easy enough—in *theory* !” he exclaimed, with an uncomfortable laugh ; “but when it comes to practice, it’s quite another matter.”

“The more difficult the task, the more credit shall we have if we succeed,” I encouragingly responded ; and then I suddenly changed the subject, as I wished to lead the way gradually to the object I had in view, and feared, lest by pursuing so uncongenial a theme just then, I might disgust him altogether, and so be the means of doing him harm rather than good.

His health was not even yet sufficiently re-established to admit of our taking any lengthened journey except by easy stages ; and though the necessity of thus husbanding his strength was evidently very repugnant to himself, he had no option but to do it, so conscious was he of his own inability to go far, without being thoroughly knocked up.

Finally, therefore, he arranged that we should spend two or three weeks in Brighton before leaving the country, and while there my difficulties practically began.

The first day passed quietly enough, but the next morning, soon after breakfast, he

came into our private sitting-room (we were staying at the Grand Hotel) where I was quietly engaged in writing a letter, by his own special request, to his father, to inform him of our change of plans and give him our present address, and observed with an air of great satisfaction :

“ We shan’t be quite so dull as I expected after all, as I have just made the discovery that several nice fellows I know are staying here ; I met one of them just now in the smoking-room.”

“ Oh ! ” I replied, looking at him rather dubiously.

“ He wants us to join his party at the theatre to-night, and afterwards he gives a snug little supper in his own room, and——”

“ Of course you refused ? ” I observed, in as indifferent a tone as I could assume.

“ Refused ? No ! why should I ? ” and there was anything but a pleased inflexion in his voice.

“ Well, you see, it is very important that you should be prudent just now,” I remarked in a sort of general way, “ you have so much downright hard work before you in the shape of travelling, you know, that I really think,

if I were in your case, I should prefer keeping quite quiet just at present, so as to be able to get up your strength and——”

“Ah, yes, it’s all very easy for you to talk about being quiet,” he hastily interrupted, “but, my dear fellow, it’s out of the question, however much I might wish it. Darlington—the man I met just now—would take precious good care to rout me out, so I may just as well make a virtue of necessity and join him as he wishes. Why, what are you afraid of?” he demanded sharply and suspiciously, on getting sight of my face.

“I am afraid of your overtaking your strength,” I replied, without a moment’s hesitation.

“Oh, there’s no fear of that !” he exclaimed, apparently relieved ; “besides, you will be at hand, you know, to give me the benefit of your sage advice, in the event of your fancying that I was overdoing it.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said slowly and thoughtfully ; “of my own accord I should far rather keep away from these sort of things.”

“Nonsense, man, I’ve got a special invitation for you,” was the hasty response, “and

Darlington's coming himself to call upon you in the course of the morning."

"I would much rather he kept away," I honestly replied; "a little quiet would do you all the good in the world, and you promised, also you know, that we should begin our reading to-day."

"Yes, yes, but we must just put that off," was the somewhat impatient rejoinder, and I plainly perceived from his tone and manner that further remonstrance would be useless, so there was nothing for it but to drop the subject.

When Mr. Darlington came I scanned his countenance very anxiously, and listened to his conversation with great attention, in order to satisfy myself as to the style of man he was; whether, in short, he would be likely to assist, or hinder, me in my projected plans, for the mental and moral benefit of his friend.

I found him, as I had rather feared would be the case, a noisy rattling convivial sort of man, with nothing to recommend him, save a certain amount of good looks, an agreeable though rather rough-and-ready manner, and money to any extent.

He laughed at my fears when I ventured to remind him that Mr. Stafford was not very strong, and that we had come to Brighton solely on account of his health, as he had been ordered rest and quiet ; told me that a little " fun " would do him all the good in the world, and seemed so determined to carry his point, that I became discouragingly conscious of my own utter helplessness, and could only look disapprovingly on, hoping almost against hope that at the last moment something or other would occur to prevent my head-strong companion from carrying his plans into execution.

Vain hope ! he had made up his mind to go, and no power on earth, save that of actual force, would have prevented him from doing so.

" I declare, you look as if you were on the point of setting out for a funeral," he laughingly observed to me, as the time approached for us to join his friends.

" Do I ?" I answered, rather absently ; I was wondering whether any argument I could use would have sufficient weight with him to induce him to spend the evening quietly with myself, instead of running the

risk of bringing about a relapse in his own state of health, by taking part in a scene which would, I instinctively felt, be more or less exciting.

“ I’ll tell you what it is, old fellow,” he exclaimed, with sudden compunction, “ it seems selfish of me to drag you out when you would so evidently rather not go ; so if you wish it, I’ll make your excuses to Darlington ; tell him you have an engagement, or some such innocent fabrication to account for your non-appearance.”

“ Thank you,” I quietly answered, “ but if you are really going yourself, I should prefer accompanying you.”

“ Just as you like,” he carelessly responded.

No more was said, therefore, and in course of time we set out.

My duty was clear, I thought ; wherever Mr. Stafford went thither I must myself go, if it could be by any means managed ; and however repugnant it was to me to meet these unsteady, shallow-minded, pleasure-loving men, the ordeal must be gone through, for the sake of him whom I had undertaken to look after, and save, if possible, in spite of himself.

I could easily see by certain dubious, and not altogether satisfied looks, which were from time to time either levelled at myself, or exchanged between kindred spirits, that my presence was by no means welcome to all the members of the reckless little coterie who met at that night's entertainment; and in answer to an apparent question regarding me put by one of his guests, I distinctly overheard Mr. Darlington's answer, given in a kind of good-humoured aside.

"Oh, he's Stafford's chum; a sort of travelling tutor; keeper—anything you like. Sets up to be good, too."

"I wonder why he is here, then?" mockingly parenthesised his friend.

"Edmund swears by him; and won't stir an inch without him," pursued the other.

"Is he a gentleman?" and I felt, rather than saw, that his eyes were doubtfully directed towards myself.

"Oh yes," was the confident rejoinder, "there's a mystery attached to him, it seems, and he *may* turn out a prince in disguise! at any rate he's as grave as a judge, and as wise as Solomon! carried off all the prizes at the Middlebury College, and only accepted his

present post to oblige the worthy baronet, whose grey hairs his hopeful son is doing his best to bring down with sorrow to the grave."

There was a laugh at this, but Mr. Stafford, who happened to be sitting at the other end of the table, did not notice it, and if he had, he would never have guessed that it had been raised at his expense.

"There are gentlemen, and gentlemen," observed a quiet voice at my side, and glancing hastily round, I became conscious that the young man next whom I was seated, and to whom I had not hitherto paid much attention, was regarding me with an expression of decided interest, "and whatever Mr. Darlington's opinion on the subject may be, *I* do not consider that it is by any means a sign of good breeding, thus to discuss the character and status of a guest at one's own table."

"Oh, it doesn't signify in the very least so far as I am concerned," I hastened to assure him, "I don't care much as a rule what people say about me."

"Do you not—well, I only wish I could say the same; but, to tell you the honest

truth, I am keenly alive to anything in the shape of ridicule."

"Are you really?" and I looked more attentively at him than I had yet done, being struck by a certain tone of refinement about him, somewhat different from the rest of the slightly boisterous group.

He had a pleasant face; frank, good-natured, and ingenuous; with thoughtful brown eyes, and a thoroughly aristocratic bearing; and I fancied he seemed almost as much out of place amid his present surroundings as I was myself—although unlike myself, he was evidently considered an acquisition to the party, for he was constantly appealed to, made much of, and looked up to, and treated by every one, from the host downward, with marked respect and attention.

"I am almost as much a stranger here as yourself," he observed, presently, just as if he had read my thoughts, and delicately wanted to set me at my ease, "but my cousin," nodding his head at a tall fair-haired rather stupid-looking man almost directly opposite us, "is a great friend of Mr. Darlington's, and so he made me come. The

fact is, I've been in trouble," here he lowered his voice to a very confidential tone, "lost my father not long ago, and came to Brighton for a little change."

"I'm very sorry," I murmured, as he paused and fixed his eyes upon my face as if expecting me to say something; "it's a dreadful thing to lose one's friends."

"Ah, yes; and people understand your feelings so little," he went on, with a touch of emotion; "wherever I go, they all urge me to exert myself more, live in a constant whirl; and, in this way," glancing rather contemptuously around him, "try to forget my loss. Just as if it was so easy to forget!" he added, scornfully.

"Some natures forget much more readily than others," I responded, thinking, it must be confessed, of poor Mrs. Green.

"Ah, yes, no doubt," he assented, rather dreamily; "there is your friend now," he proceeded more energetically, after a moment's pause, and he fixed his eyes rather meditatively upon Mr. Stafford's mirthful countenance, "I should not think *he* possessed any very strong feelings."

"I don't know. I rather fancy he has

more depth than we imagine," I replied, with a smile; "but we can scarcely be called friends yet," I went on, in an explanatory tone; "we know too little of each other for that."

"Well, so far as my own personal experience goes, a very short time is needed to cement a friendship," shrewdly remarked my new acquaintance; "I can always tell at a glance whether I shall like a man or not."

"Do you ever find that you have made a mistake?" I hazarded.

"*Never!*" was the emphatic reply.

"Well, I certainly go a good deal by first impressions myself," I admitted, as my eyes once more rapidly scanned his countenance; "so far, at least, as mistrusting a person goes. In a case of real liking I always fancy it is different, as we cannot possibly fathom the whole of a man's character in a moment, and, as one pleasant trait after another develops itself, and we see how much better, and nobler, and kinder he is than we had ever previously imagined him to be, our liking gradually increases and grows stronger——"

"Yes, yes," hastily interrupted the other; "that is all very well as far as it goes; but

you seem to forget that the liking itself must have been already there, or it could not go on increasing ; so that my theory still holds good, you see."

I should have felt greatly amused at the earnestness of his manner, in thus trying to convince me that our views on the subject, though apparently different, were in reality identically the same, but for the anxiety I was beginning to feel about Mr. Stafford, whose flushed face, and eager excited way of talking, showed me that his health would in all probability suffer if he were to remain much longer upon the stretch.

And yet how powerless I was to render him any practical assistance on an occasion like this ! How utterly impossible it was for me to attempt to remove him from all these dangerous and seductive influences, so long as it was his own pleasure to stay ; how entirely out of the question it was even to utter a warning word, or give him the gentlest of hints, without wounding his sensitiveness or offending his pride.

I dared not run the risk of it—dared not show, by my look or manner, what my own sentiments were, lest it should furnish his

friends with an excuse for having a sly hit at him, and perhaps encourage them to allude to the peculiar position I occupied with regard to him, in such a ridiculous way as to cause him considerable irritation and annoyance.

While I was thinking thus, the stranger with whom I had been so lately conversing came suddenly to my rescue, by rising somewhat abruptly from his seat and announcing that it was time to go ; and during the little stir that ensued, while he was shaking hands with Mr. Darlington, and carelessly replying to that gentleman's remonstrances for being the first to break up the party, I approached Mr. Stafford, and proposed, in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice, that we also should be stirring.

Fortunately, he never attempted to offer any resistance, but fell quite naturally in with the suggestion. Fortunately, too, our host did not press him to remain ; probably because he was glad of the chance of getting rid of my own obnoxious presence.

A few minutes later, therefore, saw us once more in our own rooms, which I, for one, wished we had never left, so thoroughly uncomfortable and ill-at-ease had I been

during the entire evening—or rather night, for it was now morning.

After consigning my partially intoxicated but still talkative companion into the hands of his servant, I retired to my apartment, weary and sick at heart, utterly disgusted with the part I had undertaken to play, and vainly wishing that some other and more congenial post had been assigned to me—something that I could engage in with at least a certain amount of satisfaction to myself, instead of this most distasteful occupation, this humiliating, thankless office, which seemed likely to do no one any good, least of all the poor unfortunate young man whose unsteady habits I was supposed to have the power of arresting, but whom I now discovered to be anything but easy-going where his personal inclinations were concerned, and not at all a likely person to allow himself to be influenced by the wishes and opinions of other people, unless they chanced to coincide with his own.

I am afraid I took a very gloomy and desponding view of the case just then; I felt

“With my path at strife.”

All seemed so dark, and bewildering, and perplexing ! so new to anything I had conceived of before. I had my duty to do, but knew not how to do it. A gigantic work lay before me, but I shrank from attempting it ; and the more I regarded it from my present standpoint, the more difficult did it appear.

And then my mood suddenly changed, and I remembered my promise to Sir Stafford, and accused myself of cowardice in permitting these obstacles to discourage me.

CHAPTER VI.

A NOBLE ALLY.

“’Tis not enough to help the feeble up,
But to support him after.”

“Ill habits gather by unseen degrees ;
As brooks make rivers, rivers run to seas.”

“Young men *think* old men are fools ; but old men
know young men are fools.”

THROUGHOUT the ensuing day Mr. Stafford appeared very silent and languid ; but the following morning found him bright and cheerful as ever.

We mutually refrained from alluding to what had occurred, but he regarded me from time to time, I fancied, with a sort of wistful inquiring glance, as if trying to find out whether he had said or done anything to forfeit my good opinion.

I did not utter a word, however, which could lead him to suppose that such was the case ; but took especial pains, on the contrary, to behave towards him with exactly the same amount of friendly regard as before, and never allowed him to suppose from my manner that I had noticed any peculiarity in his mode of going on at the Darlington party, much less that I suspected, what was indeed the case, that he was not by any means as sober as could have been wished on his return.

Soon after breakfast on this second morning we went out for a walk, and, as we were returning to the hotel a couple of hours later, we fell in with Mr. Darlington.

“I have just been inquiring for you,” he said, as he stopped to shake hands ; and then he made a movement as if to turn back with us—a movement which I was relieved to find my companion did not notice, otherwise he would have been sure to invite him to lunch with us, in which case I could not be at all certain as to the result.

“Ah, I am sorry we missed you,” was Mr. Stafford’s somewhat indifferent reply.

“I was going to ask you whether you

would like to join some fellows this afternoon, in——”

“This afternoon!” dubiously repeated Mr. Stafford. “We had arranged to go to the Aquarium, I think?” And he looked at me, as if inviting me to suggest the advisability of putting off this very tame affair in favour of something or other which would, he doubtless felt, be far more to his taste. “My learned friend here,” he went on rather hurriedly, on perceiving that I had no apparent intention of falling in with his unexpressed, though not-to-be-mistaken wish, “has just discovered that it contains some fresh novelty in the shape of a *rara avis* whose acquaintance he is particularly desirous of making.”

“Yes,” I promptly chimed in; “I am looking forward to it with the greatest interest; and as I have never yet had an opportunity of visiting this Aquarium at all, and Mr. Stafford is perfectly *au fait*, it seems, with its every corner, he has kindly promised to cicerone me himself.”

“You won’t find much worth seeing *there*,” was the contemptuous response.

“Tastes differ,” I answered quietly, but

firmly; for I had made up my mind to carry my point in this one instance, if possible, as a sudden light had dawned across me while he was speaking, as to the special nature of the occupation in which himself and his like-minded friends were to be that afternoon engaged.

Before he had time to offer any reply to this slightly aggressive remark of mine, his attention was claimed by the gentleman whom I had so lately met and conversed with at his own table, and to whose kindly intervention I felt that I was indebted for having been able to remove Mr. Stafford from the noisy scene just at the fortunate moment I did.

"I seem to have interrupted quite an animated discussion," he observed, turning to me with a frank and pleasant smile, after exchanging a word or two with Mr. Darlington; and he held out his hand just as if we had been long-standing acquaintances.

"No, indeed; we were only talking of the Aquarium," I answered. "Mr. Stafford and I are going to spend a little time there this afternoon."

"Are you ——?" he began; when his sen-

tence was cut short by Mr. Darlington, who exclaimed, mockingly :

“Yes ! Would you believe it ? Stafford and his—*friend*,” there was a very perceptible degree of hesitation before this word came out, during which his eyes were fixed rather insultingly upon my face, “prefer going there to joining *us*——”

“I wonder if *I* might be allowed to accompany you ?” This time the stranger—whose name I did not yet know—directed his conversation to Mr. Stafford. “It will be a real pleasure to me.”

“Of course we should be only too happy,” warmly responded the latter ; and by the gratified look which came over his face, I saw that the question was practically settled.

“Surely *you* won’t desert us ?” remonstrated Mr. Darlington, a cloud black as night settling over *his* countenance.

“You can scarcely call it deserting you,” was the careless, off-hand rejoinder ; “as I am not aware that I ever agreed to——”

“But your cousin quite gave me to understand that we should have the pleasure of your company,” quickly interrupted Mr. Darlington ; and there was an anxious, per-

suasive tone in his voice which showed that he was quite in earnest in regretting *his* defection, whatever might be the case regarding ourselves.

“My cousin is of course perfectly at liberty to enter into engagements for himself,” replied the other, drawing himself up with a gesture of unmistakable haughtiness; “but he has no right whatever to include me in his calculations.”

“Then you really won’t go?” observed Mr. Darlington, looking decidedly crestfallen.

“Thanks; no! I would much rather join Mr. Hale and his friend at the Aquarium,” was the smiling response; and after fixing the time and place of our next meeting, he passed on his way.

“Upon my word, I ought to congratulate Mr. Hale upon the conquest he has made!” sarcastically remarked Mr. Darlington; and his face, as he spoke, was by no means a pleasant one to look upon. “There is no denying the fact that, for his age, Lord Willoughby is one of the haughtiest and most exclusive men I ever met with. You may consider yourself very lucky, therefore,” turning round upon me with a covert sneer,

“to have so soon succeeded in establishing yourself in his good graces.”

I laughed unconcernedly, as I replied :

“This is only the second time I have ever seen him ; and, until this moment, I did not even know his name.”

“Really ?” spoken unbelievably. “How very odd !”

“I don’t see anything odd about it,” exclaimed Mr. Stafford, who was evidently delighted at the turn which things had taken. “It could scarcely be expected that Hale should find out who he was by intuition, as I don’t suppose you formally introduced them.”

“No, indeed ; I’m afraid I omitted to perform that ceremony,” was the reply, uttered in a tone of mock regret. “But as it happened, you see, it was of no great importance, as they got on perfectly well without it.”

“So it appears,” acquiesced Mr. Stafford ; and with a complacent smile upon his lips he put his hand upon my arm, nodded a familiar “*Au revoir*” to his friend, and drew me away.

The next day Lord Willoughby called upon us, and during the remainder of our

stay in Brighton we were constantly thrown into his society.

This proved of immense advantage, both to myself and my companion, as it rendered the latter, to a very great extent, independent of other resources in the shape of acquaintances, and enabled me to keep him far more out of the reach of temptation than I could under other circumstances have done.

I felt in my heart that I could not be too thankful for the valuable assistance which was thus generously and with the utmost tact and delicacy afforded me, by a man on whom we neither of us had the slightest claim, and who had indeed up to the present time been quite a stranger to us both.

Once I ventured to give expression to my feelings on this subject, and I then discovered, what I had all along suspected, that he had from the very first understood the peculiar difficulties of my position, and that his subsequent timely intervention had been, not the result of mere accident, but a regularly arranged thing entered into with himself by way of lessening my perplexities, and giving my poor friend a helping hand in his fitful struggles after a new and better life.

"You have been of the greatest possible service to me," I gratefully assured him, on the particular occasion to which I refer—when he had taken considerable pains to dissuade Mr. Stafford from joining the Darlington party at certain forthcoming races—"I don't know how I *could* have managed this last affair, but for you."

"I am only too glad to think I have been able to help you," was the kindly reply; "it makes me appreciate my social status more than I have yet done," here he laughed softly to himself, "to find that it gives me a certain amount of influence over certain natures; for I dare not 'lay the flattering unction to my soul' that it is my own personal merits or worth which makes people listen to what I say."

"Rank and wealth are not to be despised," I quickly answered, "for they increase one's power of doing good."

"I suppose they also add to one's responsibilities," was the somewhat dubious rejoinder.

"No doubt," I assented, eyeing him sympathetically, for I had heard before this the story of his life; how his father, to

whom he was passionately attached, had been cut off in the most sudden and unexpected manner without a moment's warning; and how, when the news was conveyed to him, and he realised the melancholy fact that he was left desolate and alone—his mother had died in giving him birth, and he had neither brother nor sister—he turned from his new title with loathing and disgust, hated the wealth which had flowed to him under such peculiarly painful circumstances, and felt as if he should never be able to look upon his altered prospects with toleration, much less gratification or pleasure; never be able to forget his own great and irreparable loss.

Now, for the first time, he was beginning to derive a certain amount of qualified satisfaction in the thought of the decidedly influential position he occupied, especially with regard to those who in point of age and family might be said to be similarly situated to himself, but whose personal standing and pecuniary advantages were of a far more limited and circumscribed character; and to a generous spirit such as Lord Willoughby's undoubtedly was, the idea of benefiting others

could not but bring about some kind at least of disinterested complacency, in spite of all the bitterness and sorrow he must still experience, whenever he reflected upon the cruel blow which had at one direful stroke deprived him of the father he had loved so well, and whose loss he still continued most keenly to deplore.

“What makes Sir Stafford Stafford so anxious to prevent his son from attending these races?” inquired the young nobleman after a pause; “is he in the habit of making heavy bets?”

“Yes; he has already lost tremendously it seems; then, too, the excitement is very bad for him, to say nothing of Mr. Darlington’s injurious example,” I answered, rather hesitatingly.

“Poor fellow! it’s a great pity he has not more strength of mind,” was the regretful rejoinder, “for he certainly has his good points.”

“Indeed he has,” I warmly assented; “in many respects he is most pleasant and amiable, and a really interesting companion.”

“I have been wondering whether I might suggest joining you in your travels for the

next few months," continued Lord Willoughby, looking at me with a fixed, inquiring gaze, as if to find out from my face what I thought of the plan; "we should get on very well together, I fancy, and I might"—here a shade of embarrassment could be discerned in his manner—"possibly be some slight assistance to you; while on the other hand," speaking in a more decided tone, "it would be a first-rate thing for me to have the privilege of associating with so clever and intellectual-minded a man as yourself, not to speak of the advantages which my health would probably derive from the constant change of air and scene."

"But my dear Lord Willoughby, you quite lose sight of the drawbacks!" I exclaimed, with a dissentient shake of the head; "it would never answer! and I could not for a moment think of advising you to try it."

"Tell me one thing, Hale," here he leant eagerly forward, and laid his hand impressively upon my arm, "would you personally object to my company?"

"Object!" I repeated, half-reproachfully; "how can you ask such an unnecessary question?"

“You really *don't*, then?” and a sudden gratified expression sprang over his countenance; “thank you, at any rate, for that. Short though our intercourse has been,” he went on gravely and earnestly, “I have seen quite enough of your character to show me that you are one of the few people I have ever met with whom I could positively like, and esteem, and what’s more, thoroughly trust!”

“Indeed, you think far too well of me,” I replied, greatly touched by the kindness of his tone and manner.

“It’s not often I become enthusiastic where people are concerned,” he meaningly responded, “so you will, I hope, give me credit for sincerity.”

“I owe you already more than I shall ever be able to repay,” I feelingly observed, thinking as I spoke of the many occasions on which he had so kindly and delicately come forward and helped to amuse my poor novelty seeking companion.

“You had better turn the tables then, and let me travel with you for a while,” he half-laughingly retorted, “always supposing, of

course, that Mr. Stafford does not put his veto upon the arrangement."

"But indeed, you little know how unpleasant it *might* be," I remonstrated, as visions of some possible *contretemps*, or *désagréments*, rose before my mental horizon, "much as I should enjoy it, I yet feel——"

"Never mind your feelings, my dear fellow!" interrupted his lordship, in a tone of good-humoured raillery; "I'll just sound Stafford on the subject the next time I have an opportunity, and if *he* consents, I shall not expect you to bring forward any serious objections. I can be ready to start at any moment, so that I need be no hindrance whatever to your plans; and if we *should* quarrel, you know," he added, smilingly, "or think it advisable to part company, we can easily do so."

I was not even yet convinced of the expediency of allowing him to join us; but before I could bring forward any further remonstrances, Mr. Stafford had made his appearance upon the scene, looking, as he always did, very much pleased on discovering who his visitor was.

"I shall be awfully dull when you and

Mr. Hale have left Brighton"—this was how Lord Willoughby commenced his tactics a few minutes later—"you see I don't care a straw for your friend Mr. Darlington, or any of his set," shrugging his shoulders, and looking around him with, I thought, rather a supercilious air; "they are not my style."

Now, although in one respect this announcement might be slightly humiliating to Mr. Stafford, it was, when looked upon in another light, decidedly complimentary, as showing that *his* society was estimated at a far higher value than that of his friend; and indirectly it naturally had the effect of, in some slight degree, weakening the influence which Mr. Darlington had evidently acquired over him.

"You intend to leave this very soon, do you not?" Lord Willoughby went on, after a cursory allusion to other matters.

"Yes," assented Mr. Stafford, "in two or three days I think," glancing smilingly over at me.

"I have rather a fancy to go abroad myself for a few months," was his lordship's next remark, "only I don't like the idea of going alone on the one hand, and on the

other, I hate the thought of being tied to an uncongenial companion."

"Yes, that is very unpleasant," said my friend, making a grimace; "I have gone through the experience myself, and most unsatisfactory did I find it."

"How would it be for me to travel for a few months with you and Mr. Hale?" asked our visitor, in the tone of one to whom the notion has for the first time occurred; "I should like it of all things, if I thought my presence would not be a nuisance——"

"A nuisance!" repeated Mr. Stafford, in tones of unmistakable pleasure; "it would, on the contrary, be a source of very great pleasure—don't you think so, Hale?" appealing to me with the air of one who has no fear whatever of contradiction.

"Well," I replied, in a slow deliberative voice, "that is a question which rests, I think, entirely with your two selves. So far as I am personally concerned, I shall be perfectly satisfied whichever way you decide; but at the same time, if I may be allowed to offer a word of advice, I would ask you to consider the matter well before you seriously——"

"There's nothing serious about it," laughingly interposed Mr. Stafford, "though to look at your face, one would quite think that it was a life-long arrangement we were on the point of entering into."

Lord Willoughby said nothing; but there was an expression of mingled triumph and amusement in his eyes as he turned them towards me, which plainly showed what his own feelings were; and after attentively regarding him for the space of two or three seconds, I responded, with an air of semi-relief:

"All right—*I* won't be the one to object, if you have really made up your minds."

"I have no doubt we shall get on swimmingly together," complacently remarked Mr. Stafford, rubbing his hands with seeming delight.

"Of course we shall," cordially assented the other. "And now," he added abruptly, "you must tell me your plans."

"First of all we thought of going up the Nile."

"The very thing of all others I shall enjoy," enthusiastically exclaimed our visitor,

“ I have often fancied how pleasant it would be.”

“ After that, we have no fixed plans,” continued Mr. Stafford, “ as Hale doesn’t like looking too far ahead.”

“ Well, I think the Nile will do nicely for a beginning,” observed Lord Willoughby, smiling rather meaningly at me.

“ Yes ; it may probably take up more time than we imagine,” acquiesced Mr. Stafford.

“ Of course, you have never been there before ?”

“ No, but I have often wanted to go. Hitherto, however, the old fogies whom my honoured father selected to share my travels were not sufficiently attractive in themselves to make me wish to see more of them than I could help.”

“ In that case I don’t wonder that you should have hesitated about undertaking a journey like this in their company,” replied Lord Willoughby, “ as you are, without doubt, very much dependent upon the people you are with ; and if they happen to be disagreeable, I can quite imagine that what would, under other circumstances, be a thing of pleasure, turns out to be something widely different.”

"Just so," assented Mr. Stafford; "I have already had to pass through more than one phase of this sort of unpleasantness, and very awkward I found it."

"So I should imagine," was the half-joking, half grave assent.

"It's a very singular thing, when one comes to think of it," pursued Mr. Stafford, in a moralising tone, "how little real sympathy the old ever have for the young."

"Surely there are many exceptions to that rule," I objected.

"There *may* be, of course," he carelessly rejoined, "but I cannot say that it has ever been my lot to fall in with them. Now, there's my worthy father," he went on, reflectively, "I do believe he's as good a specimen as I could find, yet there is positively nothing he seems to enjoy more than in pointing out my faults. Then, again, look at old Fortescue, I've heard him spoken of as one of the kindest and most easy-going of men."

"So he is," I parenthesised.

"Very well, then; where young people are concerned he is the veriest fidget I ever met with! and I've heard him lecture his poor

son for an hour together, quite forgetful, apparently, of the fact that he was himself young once, and, it is to be presumed, not altogether perfect, whatever he may be at the present moment."

"He's proud enough of his son now, I can tell you," I hastily exclaimed, "and thinks there is no one to be compared to him."

"He must have changed very considerably then, since last I saw him."

"*He* would say that the change is in Harold, not himself!" I replied; "and really he is not far wrong, I think, for I never could have believed it possible for anyone to improve so much as he has done within the last year or two. From being one of the idlest and most mischief-loving of boys, he has developed into a thoroughly studious and industrious character, such as no one, however anxious he might be to do so, could find fault with."

"That must be very gratifying to yourself," said Lord Willoughby, who had heard me speak of him before, and knew the position I had occupied with regard to him.

"Yes, indeed, I feel a sort of proprietorship in him," I admitted, "and shall always

be most interested in hearing how he gets on at college."

"Will he distinguish himself, do you think?"

"Yes, I am almost sure of it," was my confident reply; "for he has first-rate abilities; and, what is better still, he knows how to use them."

The answer which this assertion brought forth from my two companions was characteristic of the men. Lord Willoughby, whose talents were of no mean order, and who had moreover taken care that they should not remain unimproved, regarded me with a quick, appreciative glance, which showed that he understood and approved of the distinction; while Edmund Stafford, whose studies had been brought to an abrupt termination by that unfortunate stroke of prosperity which had so completely turned his head, led him to shake off the paternal restraint, and launch forth into a career of dissipation and self-indulgence, before his intellectual faculties had been sufficiently awakened to make him rightly estimate the intrinsic value of learning, merely shrugged his shoulders with a little gesture of amuse

ment and incredulity, just as if he considered that young Fortescue was on the whole a very unlucky and much-to-be-pitied individual, for being thus expected to exert himself in the cause of learning.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RESULT OF LORD WILLOUGHBY'S EXPERIMENT.

“What though success will not attend on all—
Who bravely dares must sometimes risk a fall.”

“Vice is a monster of so frightful mien
As to be hated needs but to be seen :
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.”

“Crime, like virtue, has its degrees.”

LORD WILLOUGHBY carried his point, and when Mr. Stafford and myself left Brighton, he went with us.

Up the Nile we travelled in due course ; saw all there was to be seen ; took sketches of some of the most prominent features of interest, and finally returned from this our first expedition, *not* mutually tired of each other's society, *but*—I may as well confess it—fully agreed in considering that the

experiment was one which it would not be advisable to repeat.

There had been no open rupture ; nothing like a serious quarrel or misunderstanding ; on the contrary, we remained to all outward appearance on the best of terms, treated each other with the greatest courtesy and politeness, and maintained to the very end that *entente cordiale* which had so happily been established between us at Brighton. And yet we were all three more or less conscious that, as time passed on, an impalpable something gradually made itself felt ; a vague, imperceptible, shadowy, restraining influence, which greatly diminished our comfort, and had the occasional effect of embarrassing us and making us each mentally confess that we had made a mistake, in thus joining company without having first known more of each other's characters, and taken measures for ascertaining whether they could be brought to assimilate, or if not exactly assimilate, yet be likely to put up with one another's faults and peculiarities, and bear patiently all those unavoidable discomforts and inconveniences, such as a long journey like the present must naturally entail. Whether also

Lord Willoughby's lofty self-reliant spirit, and intolerance of anything like weakness, would be able for any length of time to witness, without showing signs of contempt and disgust, Mr. Stafford's frequent "stepping aside" from the strict path of steadiness and sobriety ; and whether the latter, for *his* part, might not, after the novelty of the thing had somewhat worn off, and he had become familiarised with his lordship's presence, feel rather inclined to rebel against having, as it were, two instead of one to criticise his movements, and pass strictures upon him when he chanced to give way to those periodical lapses which caused his friends so much trouble and anxiety.

From the very outset I had been, as the reader knows, exceedingly doubtful as to the result of Lord Willoughby's proposal ; but the idea was too tempting to be long withstood, and for the first few weeks after we had set out on our travels everything went so well and smoothly, that I prematurely began to congratulate myself upon having allowed my own scruples to be overruled.

Mr. Stafford exhibited during these few weeks the best and brightest side of his

character ; exerted himself to the utmost to render his society pleasant and agreeable to his new acquaintance, and behaved altogether with so much wisdom and propriety, that I could not well be otherwise than relieved and gratified at finding him thus beneficially affected by the change.

After a while, however, he seemed to grow weary of keeping up the *rôle* of a steady-going, well-principled young man ; and little by little he drifted into his old habits, with this one difference, that, situated as we then were, though the *will* may have been good to plunge into all kinds of dissipations, the opportunity was in many respects wanting so that he had to content himself with such chances as came in his way, and of these he availed himself all too freely.

Not once or twice, but times innumerable, have I seen Lord Willoughby's lip curl, and his eyes give forth a very uncertain light, when brought suddenly face to face with some fresh delinquency on the part of our misguided companion ; but I must do him the justice to admit that he never permitted himself to give utterance to a single word which could be calculated in any wise to

annoy or humiliate him, and even his looks, unless he happened to be taken by surprise, were carefully regulated, so that he might not allow him even to guess how thoroughly shocked and horrified he was on discovering the unfortunate bent of his disordered mind, and the force and obstinacy of those habits which clung to him like a garment, and from which it seemed almost an impossibility to attempt to disentangle him.

Probably, however, it may have been owing to the discoveries which Lord Willoughby thus from time to time made of Mr. Stafford's character and pursuits, that the impalpable barrier to which I have alluded first arose, to bring about a slight and not-to-be-defined impediment, in the way of our former frank and unrestrained intercourse.

For the more I considered the matter, the more important did it seem to me that I should maintain, as far as possible, a discreet silence with regard to my poor friend's failings. If I once essayed to talk of them, I felt that I should not know where to begin, nor where to end; and if by any chance he were to have a suspicion that I was in the

habit of comparing notes with Lord Willoughby, or anyone else, on this most painful subject, my influence would, I instinctively knew, at once be subject to a weakening process, which might end in my losing the little control which I had already succeeded in acquiring over him.

Then, again, in spite of the pains he took to conceal the fact and the invariable courtesy of his manner towards him, I observed with concern and regret that he became slightly jealous of Lord Willoughby as the weeks and months rolled away; so that it behoved me to be more than ever on my guard to prevent him from having any real occasion to find fault with me in this particular respect.

Not that he ever alluded to the subject in anything like an offensive manner; it was more sideways than otherwise that I detected his real sentiments, and formed a pretty correct idea of what was passing in his mind.

He not unnaturally considered me as his own peculiar property, and was rather inclined to look with suspicion upon any particular marks of friendship showed me by

Lord Willoughby ; and though he was really generously disposed in other ways, the half-defined fear which he evidently entertained lest I should get fonder of him than himself, rendered him on this one point rather narrow and exclusive.

It is just possible that Lord Willoughby may have understood the state of Mr. Stafford's feelings on this subject quite as well as I did, as he was exceedingly quick of comprehension, and not at all a likely person to be easily mistaken in a case like this ; although his own extreme delicacy of mind and manner prevented him from taking any apparent notice of the other's contracted views, or allowing either of us to suppose that he had ever so remote a guess as to the real reason of our somewhat exigent companion's occasional mode of conducting himself by way of monopolising my society, and preventing me from having more to say than he could help to himself.

As I have already mentioned, however, we got through our expedition with every appearance of mutual unanimity and good will ; and, so far as I was personally concerned, I felt, when I finally took leave of

Lord Willoughby before resuming my travels with Mr. Stafford, that I had gained a life friend—one who would heartily respond to any call which I might hereafter make upon him, and on whose kindness and regard I might always count, whatever my external circumstances might be.

The evening before we parted, in fact, he spoke out more freely than he had ever done before ; gave me plainly to understand what his own feelings towards me were, and told me in plain and unmistakable language that he should always look upon me with peculiar cordiality and affection—always be ready to come forward at a moment's notice and give me a practical proof of his esteem, and show by every means in his power the truth and reality of his friendship.

And thus we parted!—my heart stirred almost more than I cared to let him know by the warmth and fervour of his manner, and the evident regret he experienced at our approaching separation ; and yet strangely conscious at the same time of a sensation of undoubted relief in the thought that from henceforth Mr. Stafford would have no excuse for indulging in any of those vaguely

jealous suspicions which had insensibly characterised him of late ; neither would he be likely to experience quite the same amount of discomfort and embarrassment in the consciousness, which I have no doubt he now and again had, of being the subject of this high-minded young man's scrutiny and probable mental disapproval.

" Well, between ourselves, I'm glad that little affair is over," he said to me, after we had finally bade adieu to Lord Willoughby, and were just on the point of setting out on our second journey ; " he's very nice and good, and all that sort of thing—a perfect gentleman, and one whom a man may be proud to know ; still, I begin to think I hold with the commonplace proverb which tells us that two is, as a rule, much better company than three."

" As it happens, it is just as well that you *have* that idea," I answered, rather thoughtfully ; for my own nature was not so elastic a one as his, and I felt the parting with our late companion more, perhaps, than he could have understood or altogether approved of, if he *had* been able to enter into my feelings and realised the extent of my regret.

"Not but what we have had a pleasant time," continued Mr. Stafford, musingly; "and on the whole I don't regret having travelled with him. Still, it seems more natural, somehow, for you and I to be alone together."

"You may miss him more than you fancy," I observed, by way of saying something.

"Oh, there's no fear of that, as long as *you* are to the front," he answered, with a smile and a shrug. "I'm not sure," he added humorously, "that, in spite of all your high and mighty airs, and the preternatural gravity with which you take upon yourself the task of reading me a lecture, whenever you fancy I'm in danger of being overcome by any special temptation, whether I don't after all like you best."

"I sometimes fear my lectures, as you call them, don't do much good," I observed, rather wistfully, for indeed I was beginning at times to be quite discouraged.

"Never fear, man! it will all come right in the end," was the unconcerned reply.

"Will it? Well, I hope and pray that it may be so," I answered, in a low serious voice.

“And even if not, *you* can’t help it, you know,” he went on, with a clumsy attempt at consolation.

“No, that’s true,” I responded, with a sigh; “but, oh, the pity of it!” I regarded him with an anxious, earnest gaze, “to see a man wasting his money, ruining his constitution, and even risking his soul——”

“There, that will do!” hastily exclaimed my astonished companion, for I did not often speak quite so plainly; “I shall begin to find fault with your lectures in good earnest if this is the turn they are going to take;” and he regarded me with rather a doubtful expression.

“If you do, I shall have to fall back upon the stereotyped phrase, that it is all for your own good,” I responded, in a lighter tone.

“Oh yes, I understand what that means,” he laughingly rejoined; “people invariably make use of that ambiguous remark when they want to say anything particularly disagreeable. How often,” he continued, significantly, “have I had to listen to a long-winded discourse, classified under several distinct heads, from my worthy father, pre-

faced by those very suggestive words ! Ah, the very recollection is enough to make one shudder !” and he gave a little gesture of disgust.

“ Still, if it was the truth——” I demurred.

“ My dear fellow, who wants to hear the truth nowadays ?” he hastily retorted. “ For my own part, I’d always rather listen to a polite fiction than a plain, disagreeable truth.”

“ Sometimes the disagreeable things turn out nicest in the end,” I wisely observed.

“ One can’t be always thinking of the end,” he somewhat petulantly declared.

“ No,” I assented ; “ as a rule we are all too apt to keep that far out of sight : it just shows our moral cowardice.”

“ Now don’t soar away into latitudes where I cannot follow you, there’s a good fellow,” pleaded my irrepressible companion, with a serio-comic air.

I shook my head gravely, but made no other answer. It certainly seemed, at times, nothing more or less than casting pearls before swine, this attempting to make him take a serious view of his own unfortunate

position; and yet I felt that I should not be faithfully performing my duty if I did not, at least occasionally, try to awaken in him a sense of his own personal responsibility.

"The fact is, you are too good for me, Charlie," he went on presently—we had begun by this time to address each other by our Christian names. "You look upon things in quite a different light to what I do myself; you occupy, in short, a higher level, and then expect me to see every object with the same clearness as though I stood side by side with yourself."

"Could you not manage to get up a step or two higher?" I suggested.

"Entirely out of the question," was the concise reply; "a simple impossibility."

"It only needs a vigorous effort," I began; "at least——" correcting myself.

"Well?" he demanded, with a touch of impatience, as I paused.

"Well, to tell the honest truth, I don't really believe that *any* effort on your part would be enough to raise you into a more elevated and purer atmosphere. What you want, and must have, is the help of another;

with that you can do everything, without it—nothing !”

“ Ah, yes, you have often told me the same thing before,” was the somewhat moody response ; “ but it doesn’t seem to do me any good.”

“ No,” I assented, with a half sigh ; “ it’s not to be expected that it *should*, so long as you content yourself merely with listening to what I say, and take no measures for putting it into practice.”

“ Nonsense, man ! you don’t know what you are talking about !” hastily remonstrated the other ; “ just put yourself in my place for a moment——”

“ Very well,” I quietly assented.

“ But what *is* the use, after all, of going back to this vexed question ?” he suddenly exclaimed, with one of those little impatient outbursts to which I was by this time so well accustomed. “ Neither you nor anyone else can enter into my feelings and know precisely what my temptations are.”

“ Of course not,” I answered, in a quiet matter-of-fact tone ; “ nevertheless, we have all some besetting sin to conquer—some

deadly foe to fight—so far, therefore, we stand equal.”

“I don’t for one moment admit that theory,” objected Mr. Stafford. “Not all the arguments in the world, for instance, would make me believe that Lord Willoughby, with his calm and equable temperament, could ever have the same difficulties to contend with as a man of my inflammable nature has.”

“Not the same, certainly,” I assented; “his temptations lie in a different direction. He has to guard, probably, against mistaking natural excellences of character and disposition for something else; taking credit to himself, in fact, for the possession of certain qualifications regarding which he deserves no merit whatever.”

“Then, the fact of his being upright, and conscientious, and all that sort of thing, goes for nothing in his case?”

“Not exactly,” I replied. “Still, a little self-control on your part is better, perhaps, than a great deal on his.”

“I must say I don’t quite comprehend those distinctive generalities, if I may use so apparently contradictory a term, which

seem so pre-eminently satisfactory to yourself," observed my unconvinced companion, and he put on a slightly bored look, as if to show me that he had had enough of it.

Accordingly I took the hint, and changed the subject for another, and, so far as he was concerned, probably more interesting and agreeable one, his hasty, impulsive, and thoroughly uncontrolled nature rendering it very difficult to carry on an argument with him for any length of time without running the risk of fretting and irritating him, a state of things which I was always particularly anxious to avoid.

Like all weak people, Edmund Stafford was very egotistic, except just on certain occasions when his crimes and follies were brought suddenly home to him, and while the penitent fit lasted, he went into the other extreme, and became hopeless and depressed. Then he was self-indulgent and capricious, the creature of a thousand different impulses, holding far too material views of life, and thinking only, as a rule, of his own ease, comfort, and pleasure, and the gratification of his senses.

Not an easy character to get on with, much less try to reform—his good resolutions never appearing to last more than a few minutes together, while, as for his faults and failings and weaknesses, they were simply legion !

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE VICARAGE.

“ ‘ I would fain know what kind of thing a man’s heart
is ? ”

‘ I will report it to you : ’tis a thing framed
With divers corners.’ ”

“ ’Tis hard to be
Exact in good, or excellent in ill ;
Our will wants power, or else our power wants will.”

AFTER four years of incessant travelling, we returned for a short time to England ; and as soon as I had seen Mr. Stafford comfortably established under his father’s roof (where he rather reluctantly consented to remain until I should be again ready to join him), I gladly availed myself of the opportunity of once more paying a visit to my Middlebury and Saltsea friends.

For some months past I had been feeling exceedingly uneasy with regard to the state

of poor Mrs. Green's health, as in spite of her evident wish to write as cheerfully as possible, she could not disguise the fact that her constitution had been greatly shaken by a severe attack of rheumatic-fever, brought on by exposure to the damp; and the reports which Mr. Vaughan gave me from time to time of her increasing weakness, served rather to augment than allay my fears, and prepared me to find her in a very alarming and unsatisfactory condition.

My melancholy forebodings in this respect were unfortunately more than realised; for when I at length once more entered her little cottage home, I was absolutely startled at the change which had taken place in her since our last meeting.

She welcomed me with the greatest delight; told me over and over again how she had longed to see me; and then proceeded quite calmly to speak of her approaching death, an event which, judging from her manner no less than her appearance, could not, I greatly feared, be delayed more than a few days at the very utmost.

This opinion was confirmed by the doctor who was in the habit of attending her, and

whom I anxiously consulted on the subject before many hours had elapsed after my own arrival.

The cause of her present illness was, he informed me, an acute bronchial affection, which, acting upon an already debilitated frame, entirely precluded the possibility of her recovery.

And so it proved ; for within a week she had passed quietly and trustingly away, leaving me sorrowful exceedingly at having thus speedily to bid adieu to one who had for so many years acted a mother's part towards me, and yet conscious of a deep feeling of melancholy satisfaction in the thought that I had been permitted to minister to her comfort and alleviate in some slight measure her sufferings, by preventing her—so far at least as her outward circumstances were concerned—from being in any way straitened or inconvenienced, by the desertion of her worthless and unprincipled husband.

She solemnly assured me, indeed, almost with her dying breath, that her life had been a far happier and more peaceful one since the time when he had thus cruelly abandoned her ; and, but for the remembrance of his un-

paralleled heartlessness and the positive dishonesty of his conduct, she would have had cause to congratulate herself on being relieved from the incubus of his much-dreaded presence.

Immediately after the last sad funeral rites had been performed, I handed over the cottage and all that it contained—with the exception of a few personal belongings which Mrs. Green had begged me not to dispose of—to Mr. Benson, the person who had purchased the little property from the ex-schoolmaster, before the latter's embarkation for abroad; and these business matters being arranged, I was free to accept Mr. Vaughan's invitation to spend a short time with him at the vicarage.

Here also I found changes, Miss Vaughan the elder having died about a year previously, leaving her niece sole and undisputed mistress of the vicar's establishment; and Miss Belmont, too, had disappeared from the scenes, her services being no longer required by her former pupil; while the clergyman himself seemed, if possible, more devoted than ever to his fair young daughter, and inclined to

look upon all that she said or did in the most favourable and approving light.

“Would *she* be altered?” I asked myself, as I walked slowly up the smoothly gravelled avenue, after bidding a long adieu to the humble dwelling which had sheltered my infancy, and been to me, so long as my dearly loved friend, preceptor, and more than father lived, a peaceful and most happy home—would she receive me with the old frankness and cordiality, and treat me with the same kind and affectionate regard as in days gone by, or——?

Here my meditations were suddenly broken in upon, for rather an abrupt curve brought me at the same moment in sight of the house, and face to face with its beautiful young mistress.

We both paused, and gazed at each other in mutual surprise, mingled with just a shade of embarrassment.

The young lady was the first to recover herself, and holding out her hand, she said simply :

“I scarcely recognised you, but I suppose you must be—*Charlie*?” hesitating a little,

while a delicate pink flush came over the fair face.

“Yes, I am Charlie,” I answered, a thrill of pleasure passing through my whole frame on hearing her again calling me by the old familiar name; “and you are Laura—Miss Vaughan I ought to say,” correcting myself. “I should have known *you* anywhere.”

“Should you?” she replied, turning swiftly round, as if with the intention of accompanying me to the house. “I am afraid that is a doubtful compliment,” and she shook her head with one of those petulant movements I remembered so well.

“I am not sure about that,” I gravely responded; “it is just possible, indeed, that it may be the highest compliment I could pay you.”

“Ah, I know what you mean!” she exclaimed, a fleeting look of gratification springing into her eyes. “You always thought far better of me than I deserved in every way.”

“Did I?” was my incredulous reply.

“Yes, and in those days I was one of the most self-willed, unreasonable, and exacting creatures that ever lived; and—oh,” suddenly

changing her tone, "do you remember how I used to tease you?"

"Perfectly," I seriously rejoined.

"Well, I must warn you, then, that I am not much better now," she continued, looking at me with a half defiant, half deprecating expression. "I don't know how it is, but I really have improved very little in some respects."

"Perhaps you are not the best judge of that," I ventured to observe.

"Oh! yes, I think I am," she responded with the most charming candour. "I generally know what is right, even if I don't do it. But here is papa," she added in a lighter tone, as the vicar's dignified-looking figure emerged from one of the conservatories; "he will be delighted to see you."

Which he certainly was, judging from the warmth and cordiality of his manner, and the satisfied and complacent expression of his countenance on getting sight of me.

"You have renewed your acquaintance with Laura, I see," he said, laying his hand fondly upon his daughter's shoulder; "so that I shall not require—as I fully expected would have been the case—to introduce you afresh."

“He says he should have known me anywhere, papa,” she remarked, with an air of amusement; “your good offices, therefore, so far as he is concerned, would have been quite unnecessary.”

“And what about yourself, my pet?” smilingly asked the clergyman; “was the recognition mutual, or did you find some difficulty in identifying him with our old friend Charlie?”

“I think I had better leave your own imagination to answer that question,” was the playful retort; and, with a provoking little shrug, and an archly defiant glance directed towards myself, she led the way into the house.

During the next few days I must have proved rather a dull and uninteresting companion, I fear, both to Mr. Vaughan and his sprightly and gay-hearted daughter.

They bore with me, however, with the greatest patience, and each tried, though in a totally different fashion, to assuage my grief, and reconcile me to my late loss; so that I must have been ungrateful indeed had I not exerted myself to put my own feelings in the background, and endeavoured at all

events to *appear* cheerful when in their society.

Gradually, therefore, I began to look upon what had occurred in a less gloomy and despondent spirit; and the remembrance of poor Mrs. Green's calmness and serenity when brought into the actual presence of the icy-handed visitant, whose near approach often strikes terror to the hearts of the bravest, and makes the brightest and most cheerful turn pale with apprehension and dismay, served to a very great extent to comfort and sustain me, by showing me beyond the shadow of a doubt that, in her case, death—the crown of life—was in very deed

“A consummation
Devoutly to be wished;”

that she welcomed his advances, and regarded him, not as a foe, a grim-faced tyrant, who

“Finds us 'mid our playthings—snatches us,
As a cross nurse might do a wayward child,
From all our toys and baubles,”

consigning us to an unseen, unknown futurity—

“The worst
That fate can bring,”

cutting off hope, and pointing to the dark tomb as our final goal ; but rather as a *friend*, who came to guide her trembling footsteps straight upward to that peaceful shore, where “the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary be at rest.”

She had had her trials, but now they were ended ; and this thought of itself ought, I knew, to afford me pleasure instead of pain, and lead me, while reflecting upon her present felicity, to forget the blank which her departure had wrought in my own existence.

For her sake I had relinquished all chances of distinguishing myself at Oxford ; given up the profession upon which I had set my heart, and accepted an anomalous and decidedly uncongenial post, by way of providing for her temporal necessities, and preventing her from suffering in a pecuniary way from her husband’s infamous conduct. So long as she lived I never once regretted the choice I had made, or dreamt for a moment of changing my plans ; but now that I had no longer anyone to provide for but myself, I must confess that I felt strongly tempted to begin the world afresh, as it were,

and leave Mr. Stafford to look after his own principles.

But I soon began to see the selfishness of this line of conduct. For years I had been making a sort of convenience of him, by appropriating the handsome income I regularly received at his hands without having it in my power to render him anything in the shape of an adequate return; and now that my circumstances had altered, and I was suddenly relieved from the responsibility of poor Mrs. Green's maintenance, it would, to say the least of it, have a decidedly ungracious appearance, were I to resign my post, and throw my unfortunately weak-minded and unstable friend upon his own limited resources, just at the very time that my influence over him was beginning, as I fondly hoped, to produce some slightly beneficial effect upon him.

Not that there was as yet much to boast of in this respect, for, alas! the evil was too firmly rooted within him to be easily eradicated; and many a time my patience had been well-nigh exhausted, and I had all but given him up as an utterly hopeless and irreclaimable character, so numerous and oft-re-

peated were his falls ; so serious and flagrant his vices ; so vacillating and infirm his purposes, where virtue or morality were concerned ; so obstinate and determined if anything threatened to come in the way of his own selfish and unprincipled gratification.

Still, in spite of all the darkness and the discouragements, I sometimes fancied I could descry a faint and feeble glimmer of light—just a break in the clouds—an occasional indication that he would fain extricate himself from the chains which held him captive if he could ; and whenever this happened I redoubled my efforts to raise him to a higher level, and get him to recognise the possibility of leaving the past behind him, and beginning a newer and fairer page in his life's history.

It would not be easy to describe all the obstacles I had been called upon to surmount during these years of continuous travel ; all the pain and humiliation I had suffered, on witnessing the shame and degradation of my ill-starred companion.

Several times he lay at death's door, all hope of his recovery having been given up ; and when by some miracle he was raised up

again, and his strength began gradually to return, he soon forgot the terrible ordeal he had so lately passed through—the conflict between life and death ; and once more sought the aid of every passing excitement to divert his mind from unwelcome thoughts, and enable him to drown care and evade reflection.

When one source of gratification failed him, he eagerly seized another, and flung himself, with the greatest energy and avidity, into all kinds of questionable dissipations, in spite of all my remonstrances and entreaties—in spite even of his own better judgment, and candid admission that the course he persisted in was nothing more or less than a species of madness, and must eventually end in death and despair.

Knowing his utter inability to withstand temptation, *my* great wish was to keep him as far as I possibly could out of its reach ; but this did not at all coincide with his personal views ; and as there was a very unmistakable vein of obstinacy in his disposition, arguments were of little avail when, as was too frequently the case, he took an unfortunate crotchet into his head, and doggedly insisted

on carrying his point, be the consequences what they might.

Mr. Vaughan questioned me delicately, yet with evident curiosity, as to the particular position I occupied with regard to my restless and uncertain companion ; what his leanings and idiosyncracies were ; his character, and pursuits, and general habits ; and whether I found his society congenial to myself, and considered our present arrangement satisfactory and likely to last ; or whether I should prefer, now that poor Mrs. Green was no more, to relinquish the appointment which I had accepted solely and entirely on her account, and look out for something more suitable for my peculiar tastes and attainments ; but I was very guarded in all my answers, as it was not easy to tell one part of the story without the other ; and I felt it was not my place unnecessarily to prejudice the good vicar's mind against him, by alluding to his numerous weaknesses and besetting sins ; his oft-recurring falls, and serious declensions from the paths of virtue and sobriety.

I might not have been quite so reticent on the subject, however, had I known that

before I had been a week at the vicarage Mr. Stafford would make his own unexpected appearance on the Saltsea scenes ; and my astonishment was unbounded when, on returning from a visit I had been paying in the neighbourhood in company with Mr. Vaughan, I discovered Mr. Stafford sitting in the drawing-room, looking very much at his ease, and conversing in the most animated and unconstrained way with my beautiful young hostess.

“ You are surprised to see me !” he exclaimed, springing from his chair, and coming towards me with outstretched hands ; “ and not over-well pleased, I should say,” he added, shrewdly, after glancing keenly at me.

“ I *am* surprised !” was my significant answer : “ naturally so, I think.”

“ Well, perhaps so,” he lightly rejoined, turning once more laughingly towards Miss Vaughan ; “ but the fact is, I’ve got some friends staying here for a month or two, and they persuaded me to join them, so here I am.”

“ Who do your friends happen to be ?” I inquired rather anxiously.

"The Townshends ; you know them, I think ?" eyeing me curiously ; "General Townshend and his family."

"Papa and I are very well acquainted with them," observed Miss Vaughan, as I shook my head negatively.

"Are they nice people ?" I asked, addressing myself to her rather than Mr. Stafford.

"Oh, the old general is delightful," she warmly responded, "and so is his wife. I don't care much for the rest, though ; they are rather coarse, and——"

"Just so," coolly interrupted the other, "and, so far at any rate as the daughters are concerned, as ugly as sin. I never met such unattractive girls in all my life," he went on, expressively shrugging his shoulders.

"There are sons then ?" I quickly remarked.

"Yes, two ; both of them in the army," he concisely responded, and then, with an air of evident relief, he hastily changed the subject.

Mr. Vaughan soon joined us, and politely invited him to stay to dinner, an invitation which he unhesitatingly accepted ; and I plainly perceived by the vicar's subsequent

conduct that he was rather struck with him than otherwise, and inclined to give him credit for being a very different character to what he really was.

For my own part I felt excessively uneasy and dissatisfied.

I could not endure the idea of his being thus cordially received at the vicarage, and permitted to associate with a refined and pure-minded girl like Laura Vaughan.

It was torture to me even to *think* of her being thrown into his society, and if I had only had an opportunity that evening of giving Mr. Vaughan a hint on the subject, I should most assuredly have taken advantage of it; but I did not see him alone for a single moment, and was obliged therefore to put up with Mr. Stafford's presence as best I could, and even stand quietly by and hear the hospitable vicar ask him to join us the following day in an excursion to Middlebury Castle, returning to the vicarage with a few other specially invited guests to dine and spend the evening.

To this proposition he of course instantly agreed, and equally of course he arrived at the stipulated hour, and succeeded—as he

always did when he considered it worth while to make the effort—in proving an agreeable and amusing companion.

Mr. Vaughan I could easily see was inclined to regard him with a favourable eye, being evidently impressed by his gentlemanly bearing, and the liveliness of his manner and conversation, and even Laura seemed, I fancied, to find his society particularly entertaining, for her whole face was radiant with smiles, and she laughed and talked with him with the utmost satisfaction, and allowed him to attach himself to her side, and devote his whole attention to her, just as if it was the most natural thing in the world for him to wish to monopolise her to the exclusion of everyone else.

I watched him anxiously, though furtively, at dinner, and an uncomfortable sensation stole over me whenever he raised his voice; as I feared lest he might, by manifesting an unusual degree of exhilaration, call the attention of Mr. Vaughan's other guests towards him, and perhaps arouse their suspicions as to the source from which he derived such elevation of spirit; but happily for all parties he kept himself well under control, and when

we at length joined the ladies in the drawing-room, I could see by the deliberate way in which he walked straight over to the piano-forte, at which our young hostess had just seated herself, and the sensible manner in which he began to discuss the merits of a certain song she had been asked to sing, that on one important point at least I had nothing whatever to fear.

Still, *how* I hated seeing him hovering thus closely about the beautiful and guileless girl, whose hand he was no more worthy to touch than the loathsome reptile is fit to associate with the harmless snow-white dove! how angry I felt when I saw his restless blue eyes fix themselves admiringly upon her face, and heard his voice take a low caressing tone whenever he spoke to her. Never before had I cherished such bitter and unchristian-like sentiments as those with which he had suddenly inspired me, and I could with the greatest difficulty control myself sufficiently to pay even the semblance of courtesy and attention to the remarks which were from time to time addressed to me by an obligingly talkative young lady, who probably concluded that my unnatural taciturnity and grave

abstracted manner proceeded from shyness, and that all I required therefore was to be set at my ease, drawn out, and encouraged.

Once during the evening Miss Vaughan turned towards me with one of those graceful little imperious gestures which I had never before disobeyed, and asked me to join her in a duet which we had gone over together the previous day ; but I could no more have sung just then than if I had been a condemned criminal standing on the scaffold five minutes before the time fixed for my execution ; and there must, I think, have been something peculiar in my voice and appearance, as I huskily murmured a word or two of excuse, which warned her not to press the matter ; for after regarding me for a minute with a perplexed, wondering expression in her lovely violet eyes, she quietly laid down the piece of music which she had been holding, and going up to a middle-aged lady who was seated at the other end of the room, she persuaded her with some little difficulty to take her place at the instrument, while she proceeded herself to bring forward a book of valuable engravings for Mr. Stafford's inspection.

When the latter came in his careless, good-natured way to take leave of me for the night, he glanced at me rather curiously, I thought, as if trying to account for the unusual coldness of my response, and the shortness and abruptness with which I replied to some unimportant inquiry he made as to our plans for the ensuing day.

If I could have managed it without positive rudeness, I should have retired to my own room after seeing the last of the vicar's guests off the premises without again meeting my fair hostess, but it was not to be; and I was conscious of a very uncomfortable sensation of constraint and embarrassment as I held out my hand, and wished her good-night.

"What has been the matter with you all the evening?" she unceremoniously demanded; "were you ill, or"—hesitatingly—"cross?" and the laughing eyes travelled investigatively over my grave features.

"The latter," I answered in all sincerity; "people do get out of temper sometimes, you know," I added, apologetically.

"What was it about?" she quickly inquired.

"I'm afraid I cannot tell you just now," I said, trying hard to speak in my usual tone.

"Was it me you were angry with?" she went on, a little flush coming over the fair face.

"You? Ah no! I don't think I could *ever* be really angry with you," I impulsively exclaimed.

"Thank you," was the softly-uttered reply, and—could I really believe the evidence of my senses, or was it merely fancy?—a sudden ray of glad surprise lighted up her whole countenance, while her eyes positively sparkled with satisfaction.

Even as I gazed at her, however, in amazement and incredulity, she recovered her former semi-serious manner, and inquired gently:

"Who was it then that made you cross?"

"Never mind," I hastily responded, a strange new feeling of tumultuous pleasure stirring at my heart; "just look at this," and I showed her my watch.

"I'm afraid you are a little bit of a tyrant," was the half-reproachful, half-amused remark.

"Tyrant indeed!" repeated Mr. Vaughan,

who just then joined us ; " my dear child, you ought to have been in bed hours ago ! "

" I wonder how you would have contrived to amuse your guests, if I had quietly retired, and left to you the pleasing task of looking after them ? " she laughingly retorted.

" Well, they are gone now," he observed, " so there is no reason why you should sacrifice yourself any longer to the proprieties."

" Poor papa ! he doesn't half like the idea of being thrown upon his own resources when it comes to the question of entertaining people," returned his daughter, in a tone of mock condolence ; " I really don't know what he *would* do," she went on reflectively, " if he had not me to help him."

" Oh, you conceited girl ! " cried Mr. Vaughan, holding up his hands in pretended indignation ; " I wonder when you will settle down into a meek, sedate, and humble-minded young lady ? "

" Never, I fear," was the prompt reply, " so long as you *will* persist in petting and spoiling me."

" My darling ! " and the dignified vicar's eyes glistened as he turned them lovingly

towards her, while he laid his hand tenderly and caressingly upon her shoulder, and leaning forward kissed her on the forehead ; “how can I do anything *but* make much of you, when you are the very light of my existence !”

“You dear old flatterer !” and a beautiful smile stole softly over the sweet face, as she affectionately returned his kiss, and then coming up to myself she held out her hand, bade me good-night, and was gone !

This gave me the opportunity I had been vainly wishing for—of speaking a word of warning to Mr. Vaughan with regard to his late guest—and yet, now that I had the chance of doing so, I allowed the moment to pass without taking advantage of it.

My own ideas were in such a confused disordered state that it would, I felt, be utterly useless for me to attempt just then to discuss so painful and serious a subject, with that calmness and impartiality which ought to characterise me in bringing forward a question of such vital importance, and involving possibly future consequences of considerable gravity and magnitude.

No ; when I spoke at all—if ever I did

speaking—it must be in quite a different spirit to that by which I was then conscious of being actuated. Every thought of self must be entirely set aside, and I must act only from strictly conscientious and disinterested motives, without any reference to my own personal feelings; with no object, in short, save that of conducing to the well-being and happiness of Laura Vaughan.

No mention, therefore, did I make of Mr. Stafford's name, but after exchanging a few sentences on indifferent topics with my clerical host—or, more properly speaking, after listening to sundry observations made by him without having any very distinct perception of their meaning—I went abstractedly away to my own room, where I spent the intervening time until we met again at a late breakfast, *not* in sleep, but amid—

“A chaos
Of darkly brooding thoughts”—

a sort of shifting phantasmagoria, whose images appear only to be replaced the next moment by others equally evanescent; a wild tumultuous mass of heterogeneous and undistinguishable fancies; a promiscuous

blending of all kinds of harassing and conflicting ideas, which leave the mind in a most unenviable state of doubt and distraction, perturbation, and disquietude.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. STAFFORD'S ATTENTIONS.

“Explore the dark recesses of the mind,
In the soul's honest volume read mankind,
And own in wise and simple, great and small,
The same grand leading principle in all,
—— and by whatever name we call
The ruling tyrant, Self is all in all.”

“Do you know, Charlie, I was quite agreeably surprised to find your friend Stafford such a pleasant and gentlemanly fellow!”

This was how the vicar addressed me, as we lingered over our late breakfast the following morning.

“Were you?” I answered, studiously averting my eyes from his face, lest they should betray my real feelings.

“Yes, I somehow fancied he would be an altogether different sort of person; but,

judging from the little I have seen of him, I should imagine he must be very amiable, and easy to get on with."

"I suppose he will want to be setting out on his travels again before long," was my ambiguous rejoinder.

"Oh, not just yet, I hope," quickly exclaimed Mr. Vaughan. "You promised me at least a month, and I am sure neither Laura nor I will be at all pleased if you curtail your visit. What say you, dear?" appealing to the young lady.

"Perhaps he is getting tired of us, papa," she demurely observed.

"Is that likely?" I asked, looking rather reproachfully towards her.

"How can I tell?" and she laughed merrily. "It is quite within the limits of the probable, I suppose, that you may miss Mr. Stafford's society as much as he evidently misses yours."

"What makes you think he *does* miss me?" I inquired, somewhat eagerly, wondering, meanwhile, whether he could by any possibility have said or done anything to show her that the position I occupied with regard to him was of no ordinary kind.

"Oh, it's quite easy to see that," she carelessly explained; "he would never have dreamt of coming here, had it not been for you."

Privately, I wished he had stayed away. Aloud, I said:

"It was the Townshends who brought him to Saltsea."

"Yes; but he would never have come had he not known that he would meet you here," she hastily retorted. "He told me so himself. He hates the Townshends, I suspect, though he *says* he likes them—some of them, at least," correcting herself, with a little embarrassed air. "But it is all nonsense—he can't bear them."

"Do you suppose, then, he came to Saltsea solely and entirely to be near Charlie?" smilingly demanded her father.

"I am sure of it, papa. He thinks it one of the most stupid places he ever was at; but he seems to have been drawn hither by a kind of magnetic attraction," here she sagely nodded her head at me, "almost in spite of himself."

"Really, that's very extraordinary," remarked her father, falling in with her

humour. "Charlie ought to feel complimented."

"I don't know about that, papa. I'm afraid he does not properly appreciate Mr. Stafford's friendship," observed the sharp-sighted young lady; and she glanced rather significantly at me.

"Very ungrateful of me, I am sure," I murmured, doing my best to speak in a quiet, meaningless tone.

"Yes," she gravely rejoined, "he raves about you; but I cannot say that I have heard you say much in *his* favour! You seem to have left us to find out his good qualities for ourselves."

"He is very fortunate in having so easily succeeded in pleasing you," I answered, in what was, I fear, a decidedly bitter tone.

"He seems good-natured, at any rate," she retorted, somewhat aggressively.

"Oh certainly," was my dry, matter-of-fact assent.

"And very lively and amusing," she meaningly continued.

"No doubt!" And a load heavy as lead suddenly descended upon me, as I remembered that *I* was neither the one nor the other.

“Yes, I think, on the whole, you have every reason to be satisfied with him,” interposed the vicar’s complacent voice; “and I have no doubt,” he added graciously, “that you have been of the greatest assistance to him in forming his character, and giving stability to a naturally weak and vacillating nature.”

“*You* are so very solid and decided yourself, you see,” jokingly explained Miss Vaughan, “that papa thinks it is quite impossible for any one to associate with you for any length of time without becoming, in some way or other, benefited from it.”

“I understand,” I replied, somewhat gloomily.

She little knew how heavy my heart was just then, and how gratingly even her harmless pleasantries fell on my ear. She little knew that every word spoken in Mr. Stafford’s praise filled me with a vague sense of consternation and dismay; a helpless and uncomfortable apprehensive dread lest his handsome and refined face, and dangerously seductive manner, should produce a lasting impression upon her susceptible mind, which would not be easily effaced. All the comfort

and satisfaction which I had derived the night before from her apparent appreciation of myself, had disappeared before the sober light of day, and I smiled bitterly as I thought of my own folly and delusion in having for one moment been beguiled into the pleasing fancy that my opinions would be likely to have any weight with her, or that she really cared about what I thought of her.

"I wonder why he doesn't settle quietly down in this country?" said Mr. Vaughan, after a short pause. "One would think he had had enough of travelling by this time." And he gazed questioningly into my face.

"I don't believe he will *ever* be content to subside into a quiet domestic character," I replied, purposely emphasising my words—on this point, at least, there should be no mistake if *I* could help it; "he requires a certain amount of excitement; and the more he moves about, the better he is pleased."

"It must be a trial to his father, seeing so little of him," continued Mr. Vaughan, in a thoughtful tone.

Privately, I considered that, so far from being a trial to him, it was the greatest pos-

sible advantage, as it relieved him from an immense amount of anxiety and responsibility, besides sparing him from a thousand personal annoyances and humiliations ; but I could not, of course, explain this to the sympathetic vicar, without entering into particulars which it seemed wiser just then to suppress. I contented myself, therefore, with making some evasive rejoinder, and then I tried to change the subject for another and less embarrassing one.

"You do not like Mr. Stafford," observed Miss Vaughan, rather abruptly, later on in the morning.

We were alone in the rose-garden together, and she had been referring to that lovely afternoon so many years ago, when I had stood there for the first time in my life, and, hearing her sudden cry, had fortunately succeeded in rescuing her from her perilous position.

"What makes you think so?" I gravely responded. "I have not said anything against him, have I?"

"Not a word," she promptly assented. "But in certain cases silence is suggestive."

"So that if one does not launch forth into

the praises of a person, it naturally follows that they have some reason for disliking——”

“No, no ; not quite so bad as that,” she laughingly interrupted. “Only—*do* you care for him ?” And she lifted her beautiful eyes to my face with an expression of irresistible earnestness.

“Well, in a peculiar kind of way I do,” was my serious reply. “I don’t look up to him, you know,” I went on candidly.

“Fancy *you* looking up to any one !” she laughingly parenthesised—alluding, I suppose, to my height.

“And I cannot pretend to approve of everything he does.”

I felt it my duty thus to qualify my admission, as she had evidently formed a very exaggerated opinion of his merits, and I had no wish whatever to have the appearance of encouraging her in looking upon him as a sort of perfect character.

“Isn’t he a good man ?” she demanded, with a quick change of tone.

Perhaps she detected some peculiarity in my voice and manner ; for my present situation was a very painful one, and I found some

difficulty in preventing myself from saying either too much or too little.

“There are different degrees of goodness,” was my evasive rejoinder.

“Nonsense ! You know what I mean, perfectly well,” she retorted, turning petulantly away from me, and beginning to rob one of the rose-trees of its blossoms.

“You had better let me do that,” I quietly remarked ; “just look at your hand,” which was bleeding from a small, though sharp wound, inflicted by an ugly thorn.

“It doesn’t signify,” she replied ; but, all the same, she allowed me to take the tiny hand into one of my own broad palms, while I carefully removed the thorn ; the roses which she had so impatiently plucked falling meanwhile unheeded to the ground.

I had just succeeded in gathering them together again, and was in the act of presenting them to her, when the object of our late remarks suddenly appeared at the entrance of the garden.

“I must apologise for intruding thus unceremoniously upon you, Miss Vaughan,” he exclaimed, raising his hat, and coming forward with that graceful ease of manner which

generally characterised him on occasions like the present; "but I met your father on the lawn, and he told me where to find you."

There was just the faintest tinge of hesitancy in Laura Vaughan's mode of responding to his greeting; and I caught a half amused, half questioning glance, directed to myself; but the next instant she had regained her usual flow of spirits, and began to laugh and talk just as if she had never known a moment's care or anxiety in her life.

"I declare I am altogether forgetting my mission," said Mr. Stafford, giving a little start in the very middle of a sentence; "Mrs. Townshend entrusted me with a note, and requested me to take back a verbal answer as soon as I could. Here it is," producing it from his pocket. "May I hope that you will do as she suggests?"

It turned out to be an invitation from the Townshends for that very afternoon, a sort of impromptu garden-party; and after Miss Vaughan had read it, she coolly handed it to me, saying carelessly:

"I suppose we must go, unless papa happens to have some other engagement."

"Even if he has, I hope *that* will not prevent your coming," returned Mr. Stafford, with considerable *empressement*. "I assure you it will be a real charity," he went on, lowering his voice to those seductive tones which he knew so well how to use.

"I don't see that the fact of my going or staying could make much difference to you," she answered, smilingly. "I shall be sure to meet plenty of people I know; and as for yourself, you will have to be on duty assisting the Misses Townshends to entertain their other guests."

"Not I!" he cried, with a very dissatisfied shrug. "No one expects anything of the kind from me! Wherever I go I am allowed a certain wide latitude, on account of my well-known erratic tendencies. Is it not so, Charlie?" appealing directly to myself.

"Yes, as a rule, you certainly contrive to follow your own devices," I drily assented; "whether it is good for you or not," I added, *sotto voce*, "is another matter."

He evidently heard the aside, for he went on, with a little laugh:

"Charlie is not a flatterer, Miss Vaughan; many a home-truth does he thrust at me

from time to time ! I assure you, he makes me quite uncomfortable."

"Perhaps you deserve to be made uncomfortable," she demurely responded.

No sooner had the words left her lips, than I saw Mr. Stafford's cheek flush with embarrassment and anger, while the restless blue eyes emitted an indignant sparkle, as if he suspected me of having opened her eyes to something at least of his true character ; but the young lady's utter unconsciousness, and probably also my own grave and unmoved demeanour, appeared to disarm him ; for he observed lightly, after waiting just long enough to regain his general easy manner :

"If it comes to that, how many people in the world, I wonder, deserve to be let alone?"

"I haven't the least idea," was the matter-of-fact reply ; "you must ask papa. Or perhaps *you*," glancing at me with a mirthful look in her changing violet eyes, "may be able to tell us, as your superior wisdom is quite an acknowledged thing in this neighbourhood."

"Speaking sarcastically, of course !" I prosaically interpolated.

“Not at all—in simple, sober earnest,” she retaliated, with a reproving shake of the head. And then, before I could make any other rejoinder, she had vanished through one of the long French windows leading into Mr. Vaughan’s study, leaving me to entertain Mr. Stafford until her return, as best I could.

Feeling as I then did towards him, I could not help being conscious of a certain restraining influence which prevented me from treating him with quite the same openness and candour as I might under other circumstances have done; for, right or wrong, I certainly *was* indignant with him for thus persistently forcing his presence upon the vicar’s daughter, and laying himself out, as he was undoubtedly doing, to render himself attractive to her; and I felt fully persuaded in my own mind (for had I not studied every trait in his character, and did I not know only too well the symptoms of what he called “falling in love”?) that if he only had sufficient time and opportunity afforded him for continuing his attentions, it would end in his declaring himself to be passionately attached to her; so that even supposing that her heart remained untouched, and she came quite scathless out

of the affair herself, certain unpleasantness would be sure to arise from other quarters, and I should probably have no end of trouble with my poor infatuated companion before I could induce him to tear himself away from his new idol.

True, his love affairs were, as a rule, as evanescent as his other pleasures; still, while they lasted, he was thoroughly in earnest, and did not at all relish the idea of being interfered with or checked in his perilous course. My own position on these occasions, therefore, was anything but an enviable or agreeable one, even where I had no personal interest in the matter; but now that he seemed in danger of selecting Laura Vaughan—the girl whom I had from my very boyhood worshipped from afar, looking upon her as a “bright particular star,” too fair, and sweet, and good, to be approached by any ordinary mortal—as the object of his devotion, my anxiety was of course naturally keener and more intense than anything I had ever experienced before, and I was firmly resolved that, whatever the consequences might be to myself, I would protect her as far as I possibly could from his polite attentions.

Judging from his restless, embarrassed manner during the few minutes that we remained together, I think it very probable that Mr. Stafford had some sort of inkling as to the peculiarly dissatisfied state of my own mind.

He purposely avoided mentioning Miss Vaughan's name, but I could see by the impatient glances which he directed towards the study-window that he was eagerly awaiting her reappearance; and when she did, at length, once more join us, with the information that the vicar had no particular engagement for that afternoon, and would therefore be happy to accompany us to General Townshend's garden-party, his relief was instantaneous and unmistakable.

He rather expected, I think, to have been asked to luncheon, in which case Mrs. Townshend might have waited long enough for the answer to her note; but after giving him her message, the young lady dismissed him with such cool *nonchalance* (evidently taking it for granted that he must be in a great hurry to return and volunteer his services to his good-natured hostess) that he had no option but to obey her.

He did it most unwillingly, however—under protest as it were—and the rueful discomfited expression of his face, as he slowly and reluctantly proceeded to mount his horse and ride away, plainly testified to his chagrin and disappointment.

We found quite a large gathering assembled at the Townshends', as we happened to be rather late in arriving, Miss Vaughan having been unexpectedly detained by visitors.

In spite of the crowd, however, Edmund Stafford's roving eyes soon singled out the object of his admiration, and he lost no time in escaping from the fascinating society of a decidedly plain, rather over-dressed, and loud-talking young lady, whom I afterwards discovered to be the most juvenile and best-looking of the general's daughters; and coming forward with a triumphant smile, he deliberately placed himself at Miss Vaughan's side.

It was quite in vain that his late companion tried to induce him to resume their interrupted game; quite in vain that one of her brothers came presently in search of him to let him know that a boating-party, which he had, it seems, previously agreed to join, only

waited his presence to set off; and equally in vain that old Mrs. Townshend gave him a private hint, from time to time, that she wanted him to do the polite to certain of her other guests, who were not so well known to her as was Miss Vaughan. and who required, therefore, to have something special provided for them in the way of amusement; not only did he persist in retaining his present post, but he contrived, after a while, much to my own disgust, to make me act as a sort of substitute for himself.

“My friend Hale is a first-rate lady’s man,” I heard him observe, in a confidential aside to his credulous hostess. “You have no idea how popular he is with the fair sex. He is a kind of lion in this neighbourhood, too, having been not exactly born, but brought up at Saltsea, where he commenced his youthful career by saving Miss Vaughan’s life, and ended by carrying off all the honours at the Middlebury College; so you see, we have good reason to be proud of him.”

Then, before the somewhat mystified old lady had time to make any response, he said, looking at me with an imploring gesture,

the meaning of which I was at no loss to understand :

“ Mrs. Townshend wants to introduce you to some ladies, Charlie, who will, she thinks, be interested in hearing about your travels.”

“ This is scarcely the time or place for giving lessons in geography,” I answered, drily ; but nevertheless I went. What else, in fact, could I do without making a scene ? Knowing, as I did, that I might just as well try to turn the sea into dry land, as get him to move an inch, so long as he had made up his mind to remain at Laura Vaughan’s side.

Not that there was anything remarkable in his mode of conducting himself, otherwise *she* would, I am sure, have been the first to put a stop to his pertinacious attentions. He did not insist in keeping her to one spot, neither did he put any obstacles in the way of her joining any of the different games which were going on in the grounds, but he took care that wherever she went he would accompany her, and whatever she did, he would have a share in it. Once or twice, while I remained on duty, strictly sentinelled by one of the loud-voiced Miss Townshends,

who took particular pains to keep me well employed, my anxious eye caught sight of them sitting, or walking together, and conversing in the most lively and animated manner, a state of things which was not exactly calculated to reassure me.

However, the afternoon wore away at last; the modest, but efficient local band, which had been engaged in playing at intervals in a retired part of the grounds, struck up its final air; the gaily-dressed throng began to separate, the numerous guests bade their adieux to hostess and friends, and one by one the long string of carriages departed, carrying, their inmates to their respective homes.

Still I did not breathe freely even yet, not being at all sure whether Mr. Vaughan's hospitable instincts might not lead him to invite his daughter's attentive cavalier home to dinner; but, fortunately for my peace of mind, the idea did not appear to occur to him; and after politely escorting her to her father's carriage, and taking leave of her with more *empressement* than ever, Mr. Stafford retraced his steps to the house, in company with the general's two sons, who, in

their boisterous, effusive fashion, had been uncommonly kind and civil to myself, and did not seem, so far as I could judge from the little intercourse I had held with them, at all likely to do my poor friend any harm in the way of precept or example, so long as he remained under their father's roof.

So far, therefore, I had reason to be satisfied ; but, alas ! my satisfaction was of brief duration, for, although we certainly drove to the vicarage without him, and dined without him, we had not been in the drawing-room more than a few minutes after the conclusion of the meal, when the door was ceremoniously thrown open, and Mr. Stafford announced !

I could scarcely conceal my annoyance and vexation as he stepped gracefully forward, and observed, with the complacent air of one who has no doubt whatever as to the manner of reception he will meet with :

“ I have brought you the song I was speaking to you about this afternoon, Miss Vaughan. I found it amongst a heap of Miss Townshend's music, and thought I would lose no time in letting you see it.”

“ Thank you,” she answered, with a coquettish little laugh and an amused arching

of her eyebrows ; “ but you really might have waited until to-morrow ; I was not dying to get it, you know.”

“ But I was dying to bring it,” he responded, in a low, significant voice, which called up a sudden flush to the fair face, while her eyes dropped hastily upon the carpet.

Only for a moment, though ; and then she once more raised them and began to converse with him in that tone of light badinage which came so natural to her, so that I had no further means of discovering what significance she attached to his words and manner, and whether the swift colour which he had succeeded in calling into her cheeks sprang merely from surprise, or the deeper feeling of gratification and pleasure.

CHAPTER X.

I FEEL CONSTRAINED TO PERFORM AN UNPLEASANT OFFICE.

“Happy is the man who, looking back, can say, ‘I have lived sincerely ;
I have wrought the task of duty, and fought the fight of faith.’
Happy, if his memories of time are as incense for the temple of eternity ;
Happy, in spite of outer foes, if conscience is his friend.”

“I must be cruel, only to be kind.”

LONG and serious were my cogitations that night ere I retired to rest.

It was quite impossible that I could disguise from myself the fact that I was deeply and passionately in love ! and that the object of my intense unalterable affection was none other than Laura Vaughan !

How I loved her no tongue could have

told ; how thoroughly and absorbingly my life centred in hers ; my whole happiness was bound up in her ; my very hopes were regulated by what seemed best for her ultimate good : it all came upon me like a revelation, sudden, strange, and startlingly real ; exquisitely painful in its strength and power, and intensity ; and yet, ah, me ! in spite of doubt, and discouragements, and difficulties most appalling and insurmountable, so sweet and rapturous, that I knew not how to contain my joy—the joy that I loved this fair, sweet, bewitching creature, with her numberless caprices, her bright clever winning ways, her generous instincts, and tender, gentle, and affectionate heart ; her wayward moods, her beauty, and originality, her capability for experiencing any amount of love and devotion ; her gentle womanly graces, her kindly unselfish impulses : I could understand and appreciate them all ! for had I not known her from a child ? watched the dawnings of a strong and noble nature within her, and comprehended and admired the quaintness and individuality of her character !

Yes ! I felt that my love had been growing

for years, though never before had it stood out in such plain and glowing colours, taking my heart, as it were, by storm, and making me, for the time being, oblivious to everything else; indifferent alike to comfort, and ease, and pleasure, so long as *she*—my idol—was near, with her bright and sunny presence, her kindly gracious smiles, transforming my whole being, and irradiating life's dreary and oftentimes monotonous pathway with a golden sheen of almost unearthly radiance.

This was one side of the picture; now for the other.

Would she be able to return my love? would her bright sparkling impulsive nature ever be brought to tolerate, much less assimilate with, one so grave and practical as my own? and as I asked the question, I began with concentrated earnestness to recal her every word and look, dwelling with a kind of lingering tenderness upon certain stray expressions of kindly regard with which she had, from time to time, favoured me, and trying to take comfort in the thought of her early preference for myself, and the many ways in which she had manifested her friendship and regard.

And then, just as I was endeavouring to look hopefully forward to the future ; just as I had succeeded in forgetting all about Mr. Stafford and his attentions, and was on the point of retiring to rest with a feeling of renewed cheerfulness, *another*, and up to the present moment, unthought of obstacle appeared in my way, and I stood still as if suddenly paralyzed, wondering bitterly at my own blindness and stupidity, in having, for one moment, lost sight of the important fact of my own unsuitability in point of means and position, for one so much above me as Laura Vaughan!

What mattered it, even though *she*, in her generosity and unworldliness, might show herself ready to overlook these mercenary considerations ; how could I for one moment expect that her proud and dignified father would ever consent to her marrying a mere penniless, positionless adventurer, such as no doubt he considered me, in spite of all the kindness and liberality which he had heaped upon me !

The very idea was absurd, ridiculous, preposterous ; and if I ventured to allude to it in his presence, he would probably conclude that I had taken leave of my senses.

By a strange coincidence it so happened that the very next morning while we were at luncheon, allusion was made to a certain marriage which had lately taken place in the neighbourhood ; and from the stern uncompromising way in which Mr. Vaughan spoke of it, it was quite evident that he strongly disapproved of the match, and was inclined to regard the bridegroom's conduct in proposing for a girl somewhat higher than himself in the social scale, and being moreover possessed of that which he appeared to lack—wealth—as being deserving of any amount of reprehension and blame.

“ But, papa, she liked him,” somewhat hesitatingly observed Miss Vaughan.

“ That does not signify in the very least, my dear,” was the sweeping reply ; “ he had no business whatever to take advantage of a mere girlish fancy, and tie her down to a position for which she is no wise suited. Depend upon it, before a year is over she will repent her choice, for as a rule these unequal marriages never turn out well—what say you, Charlie !” and he looked at me I thought with peculiar significance, as if to give double weight to his words.

“I suppose in one sense you may be right,” I answered, rather incoherently, “but I am quite inexperienced in such matters,” and with a very uncomfortable sensation I turned my eyes away, nothing doubting that he intended me to reap the benefit of this decided opinion, and take the hint which he had thus given me, as to his own particular sentiments on this most important subject.

And nothing remained to me save to battle with my own feelings, as best I could, until I should be able to bring them sufficiently under control to keep back every outward manifestation of the cruel stroke which seemed to be rending soul and spirit asunder.

It was not easy to maintain a calm exterior when my pulses were throbbing and my heart was bleeding—when a conflict, fierce and terrible, was raging within me, and I felt somehow as if God’s sun had been suddenly withdrawn from my eyes—as if life’s roseate hue had given place to the darkness of desolation, a sort of numb despair having seized me and rendered me for the time being a prey to many a gloomy foreboding, which effectually extinguished all my former hope, dashed my bright anticipations with regard

to the future to the ground, and made me realise beyond the shadow of a doubt the peculiarity of my own position, the social gulf which separated me from the object of my devotion, and the utter absurdity of for one moment supposing that Mr. Vaughan would ever allow that gulf to be bridged over and permit a poor nameless nobody, like myself, to aspire to the hand of his lovely and accomplished daughter.

Hard though it therefore was for me to bury my fondly-cherished dreams out of sight, to put away with my own hand the one good thing *par excellence*, which was needed to render my earthly career a perfectly happy one, to bid a long farewell to all those fair illusions and golden-tinted anticipations which I had, almost in spite of myself, been encouraging, I was yet conscious that it must be done.

Common gratitude alone, even if I had been actuated by no higher principle, demanded that the sacrifice should be made; and, as no one would suffer but myself, my course ought to have been a comparatively easy one to pursue, though God knows how difficult I really found it—how sorely I re-

belled against the thought of the lonely, isolated life I should from henceforth be compelled to lead, with no sweet domestic ties to look forward to, no gentle spirit linked to my own, no one to share my joys and my sorrows, to take pleasure in my prosperity and sympathise with me in my adversity.

In spite, however, of my own disappointment, I was yet sufficiently unselfish in my love to wish to spare my darling from any unnecessary pain or annoyance ; and when I saw her beautiful violet eyes fixed upon me from time to time with a wistful wondering gaze, and heard her soft voice asking me in quite a different tone to the playful, half-mocking accents which she sometimes used, if there was anything the matter, I exerted myself manfully to shake off my depression and speak and act just as if everything was going on smoothly and well with me ; and I do not think she had ever so dim a suspicion of the true state of the case, or guessed even remotely at the nature of my sentiments towards herself.

I had fancied myself actuated by the purest and most disinterested motives, in making up my mind to find some way of putting a stop

to Mr. Stafford's attentions, but now that my eyes were opened to the state of my own feelings with regard to her, I saw that mixed up with the laudable wish I entertained to spare her any future suffering on his account, there was burning in my heart a fierce and ungovernable flame of jealousy, which made me look upon all that he said and did with a stern uncompromising severity and an exaggerated sense of disapproval which I might not under other circumstances have manifested.

Still, when I tried calmly and impartially to discuss the subject with myself, putting my own wounded feelings entirely out of sight, and endeavouring with God's help to discover what my duty was and what would be most conducive to Miss Vaughan's ultimate good, I plainly saw that on me, and me alone, devolved the responsibility of putting a stop to this incipient attachment, which, if allowed to proceed, might lead to the most unforeseen and disastrous consequences.

Accordingly I decided on watching my opportunity, and, if necessary, giving Mr. Stafford a hint on the subject; and in the event of his neglecting to profit by it, I re-

solved on adopting such measures as seemed necessary to force him, whether he wished it or not, to relinquish a pursuit which could only end in disappointment and sorrow.

I should not have been quite so anxious about it had I been perfectly sure of Laura's own feelings ; but I could not disguise from myself the fact that Edmund Stafford was, seen from a certain standpoint, a very fascinating and dangerous character, with his handsome refined face, and easy gentlemanly manner, to say nothing of those flattering, insinuating tones which made his most indifferent and commonplace remarks often seem to mean far more than was really expressed ! and, for anything I could tell to the contrary, Miss Vaughan might not be altogether proof against his personal attractions if exposed too long and too continuously to the influence of his society.

I determined, therefore, to watch his proceedings, and act in such a way as should seem advisable in order to accomplish the end I had in view, and prevent him from bringing things to a climax, and perhaps committing himself even to an offer of marriage, in which case of course I should, painful

though the task would be, unhesitatingly open Mr. Vaughan's eyes as to his real character—a step which I would gladly, if possible, avoid.

But in spite of the strenuous efforts I made quietly to frustrate his plans, by preventing himself and Miss Vaughan from being thrown too closely together, I found it quite impossible to succeed in my endeavours, so stubbornly determined was he to follow his own headstrong and selfish devices.

A smile and a shrug was the only answer he vouchsafed me, when I ventured on some few occasions to hint that it would be well for him to be less demonstrative in his attentions; and, finding at length that no half measures would do, that, right or wrong, he intended to be guided solely and entirely by his personal inclinations, without giving a single thought to the feelings or interests of other people. I had no help for it but to resort to some stronger and more effectual expedient, by way of detaching him from his present position, and forcing him to withdraw from Laura Vaughan's society.

A word or two—more to the purpose than

anything which I had previously heard him utter in her presence—fell on my ear as I entered the drawing-room one afternoon with a message from Mr. Vaughan to his daughter, and my resolution was instantly taken.

Going, unhesitatingly, up to them, therefore, I said, without looking at the young lady, whose face I felt, rather than saw, was very red—the result doubtless of the unequivocal compliment she had just received—or appearing to notice the unwonted agitation of her manner:

“Your father would like to speak to you in his study. He has just returned from Middlebury, and——”

“I will go to him at once,” she exclaimed, without giving me time to finish my sentence; and with an air of evident relief she flitted away, leaving her late companion and myself alone together.

“I did not know you were here,” I said, addressing him rather coldly, after a moment’s pause.

“No, I dare say not,” was his indifferent rejoinder; “I met Miss Vaughan in the grounds, and she brought me in through the conservatory.”

Here he flung himself comfortably back in his chair, and eyed me rather curiously, as if wondering what would come next.

Seeing, however, that I remained silent, he presently went on in a would-be jocular tone; though I could see that he was slightly put out by the unwonted gravity of my manner.

"What on earth is the matter with you, old fellow? you look like an undertaker at a funeral!"

"I want to say a few words to you," I answered, coming to the point at once, "on a very serious subject; perhaps," I added significantly, "you may guess what it is about."

"Not I," he answered, putting on rather an aggrieved expression, while he began to pull nervously at his moustache, "how should I?"

"Well, there's no use in dealing with generalities," I observed, in a quiet though firm voice; "so I may just as well tell you the plain truth at once. The fact of the case is, Edmund, this sort of thing won't do—you must give it up."

"What sort of thing?" was his evasive retort.

“You know perfectly well. I have given you several hints already,” I replied, “but you did not choose to take them ; now, however, I warn you that I will be trifled with no longer ; and if you do not give me your solemn promise that you will at once discontinue your attentions to Miss Vaughan, I shall consider it my duty openly to interfere, and——”

“Upon my word, you seem to take a great deal upon yourself,” angrily interrupted my companion. “I suppose I may be permitted to use my own discretion in a case like this.”

“Pardon me, but you are not at liberty to do anything of the kind,” I quietly rejoined, “the Vaughans are my friends, and I am responsible for having introduced you to them.”

“If my memory does not deceive me, I introduced myself,” was the sullen reminder.

“Yes ; but it was upon the strength of your acquaintance with me that you were received here at all,” I observed, significantly, “and I feel, therefore, to a certain extent answerable for your behaviour.”

“Very kind of you, I am sure, to offer to stand sponsor for me,” he sneeringly retorted, “but it is just possible that I may prefer being accountable for my own actions; and it appears to me that I have as good a right to enjoy Miss Vaughan’s society as yourself.”

“The cases are not parallel,” I said, trying hard to keep my temper under control, “and besides, you cannot accuse me of selfishly pandering to my own gratification by getting up a violent flirtation with her, knowing all the time, as you cannot help doing, that it can never come to anything; but will only have the effect of compromising her in the eyes of others, without doing yourself any permanent good.”

“How can you vouch for that?” he somewhat sulkily returned. “I suppose there is just a chance that I may wish to marry her.”

“Marry her—*you!*” I cried, my indignation suddenly getting the upper hand of me. “Do you know what you are saying?” and I advanced a step towards him, feeling almost as if he richly deserved to be suffocated.

“Yes; what is there so very dreadful

about it, after all?" he asked with an air of bravado. "Many girls——"

"Just listen to me," I said interrupting him with such energy that he stopped short and gazed at me in sheer bewilderment; "do you suppose Mr. Vaughan would ever have allowed you to enter his doors, much less to sit down at his table, if he had known what you really are? Do you suppose he would have suffered you to associate with his pure-minded daughter in the way you have been doing, had he guessed, ever so faintly, at the kind of life you have been leading? If so, you little understand his character, for I can tell you once for all, that he would a thousand times rather see her lying dead at his feet, than the wife of a man like you!"

An ejaculation of smothered rage was the only answer to this plain-speaking, and I went on after a moment's thought:

"If you have a spark of generous feeling left, you will acknowledge the propriety of doing as I suggest, without giving me the pain of exposing you—introducing you to the high-principled and fastidious vicar in your true colours——"

"Do you mean to say you would actually

stoop to do *that*?" he asked, a dark look coming over his handsome face—he had become by this time so accustomed to my trying to make the best of things, by keeping his faults as much as possible in the background, and presenting him to other people in the most favourable light, that he could scarcely bring himself to believe that I was really in earnest, in thus threatening to betray him.

"Indeed yes," was my decided assurance; "unless you positively engage to let this be your last visit, I will tell him everything."

"If you did I would never speak to you again," he furiously retorted.

"I am quite prepared for that," I unhesitatingly observed; "I have already counted the cost, and, sorry though I shall be for our connection to be so abruptly severed, I could not for one moment allow that thought to keep me back from doing my duty."

"It's very mean of you, I think, taking advantage of a fellow's weak points like this," muttered Mr. Stafford, moving uneasily in his chair, while the restless eyes sought mine with a half alarmed, half imploring expression,

such as showed me that he evidently did not relish the idea of my leaving him, notwithstanding his previous passionate protest.

“The remembrance of all the difficulties into which these ‘weak points,’ as you are pleased to call them, have already led you, ought to have taught you a lesson,” I meaningly replied, “and made you anxious to avoid any future similar complications; while as for your flirtations,” here my voice grew stern and scornful, “you surely have had enough victims to satisfy you, without trying to bring discord and misery into this particular household!”

I paused for an instant, and gazed keenly and earnestly into his face, vainly looking for some expression of regret; then with a weary sigh I continued solemnly:

“There are certain scenes which even I—though I took no part in them—shall remember to my dying day. One in particular! Is it possible that *you* can so soon have forgotten it? Are you *never* haunted by the thought of that lonely Italian grave, where——”

I paused abruptly, for he had started suddenly to his feet and confronted me with

clenched hands and a pale, scared face, while a shudder ran violently through his frame. I had touched him at last.

“What is the use of harrowing one’s feelings up like this?” he said hoarsely, as soon as he could control himself sufficiently to speak. “I did not kill her.”

“Not by actual violence,” I significantly replied; “but do false promises, and neglected vows, and deliberate desertion, go for nothing?”

“Nobody but yourself would ever dream of taking such a dismal and one-sided view of the case,” he feebly objected. “I never meant her to die.”

“Probably not; nevertheless you adopted pretty effective measures, I think, to bring about the melancholy catastrophe, which—”

“There, that will do,” hastily interrupted my companion, and there was an under-current of sadness in his voice, which, taken in conjunction with the softened and subdued expression of his countenance as he turned it towards me, plainly testified that the experiment which I had thus made of refreshing his memory with regard to some of his former experiences, had so far been successful.

“God knows I don’t want to do you injustice,” I said, addressing him in a gentler and more persuasive tone; “and there’s nothing I dislike more than reproaching people for what is past and gone; but it is for your own good that I now speak; and I am sure you must confess,” I went on, kindly, but gravely, “that whenever you *have* condescended to follow my advice, you have always been glad of it afterwards.”

“Yes, yes; you are quite right,” he suddenly exclaimed, with one of those rare outbursts of generous emotion which, when they did come, gave me more pleasure than I could describe. “Many and many a scrape have you kept me out of; and if I wasn’t the most ungrateful wretch in the world, I should act up to your suggestions far oftener than I do.”

“If you could only keep yourself within reasonable bounds, it would be another matter,” I thoughtfully remarked; “but, unfortunately, you cannot do things in moderation.”

“No, that’s true enough,” he ruefully admitted.

“If you were to remain here, therefore,” I

continued conclusively, "exposed to Miss Vaughan's attractions, and being constantly thrown into her society, you would find yourself utterly unable to resist the temptation of trying to win her affection, so that the only sensible course open to you is that which I have recommended."

"You want me to leave the neighbourhood altogether, I suppose?" he somewhat dubiously rejoined.

"That would certainly be far the wisest plan," was my encouraging reply. "You can easily give some excuse, you know, and if you like I'll go with you."

I made this proposal greatly against my own inclination, but I knew perfectly well that if I suffered him to set out alone, he would lose no time in plunging into some other kind of dissipation, by way of indemnifying himself for Miss Vaughan's loss.

"Will you really?" he said, rather eagerly.

"Yes," I assented with a cheerful voice, but an aching heart; for what, after all, were his feelings compared to mine, at having thus, almost, as it were, at a moment's notice, to tear myself away from the girl whom I loved better than my own life, without being even permitted

the satisfaction of proclaiming my love, much less ask for hers in return.

“When can you be ready?” demanded Mr. Stafford, who, now that the idea was fairly presented to his mind, seemed every moment to become more reconciled to it.

“To-morrow,” I promptly responded, and after a little more conversation it was finally arranged that we should go, in the first instance, to the Isle of Wight, where Sir Stafford and the rest of the family were just then staying; and as it so happened that the baronet had written to his son only the day before, asking him to join them there, and also expressing a wish that I might be able to accompany him, we were furnished with an excellent reason for thus suddenly finding ourselves obliged to leave Saltsea, especially as Sir Stafford had mentioned in his letter that he was himself far from well, a piece of news which might naturally be supposed to influence my companion, and make him anxious to lose no time in setting out on his journey.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS VAUGHAN PUZZLES ME.

“Love is indestructible :
Its holy flame for ever burneth,
From Heaven it came, to Heaven returneth.
Too oft on earth a troubled guest
At times deceived, at times oppressed ;
It here is tried and purified,
Then hath in Heaven its perfect rest ;
It soweth here with toil and care,
But the harvest time of love is there.”

“Not even the tenderest heart, and next our own,
Knows half the reasons why we smile and sigh.”

I FULLY expected that Mr. Stafford would himself have announced his approaching departure to Mr. and Miss Vaughan, but his heart, or courage, failed him at the last moment, and he hurried somewhat uncere-
moniously away, without having again had an opportunity of speaking to either of them

on the subject, leaving to me the unpleasant task of informing them of this sudden change in our joint plans.

The evening was well advanced, before I could summon up resolution to deliver the polite message with which he had charged me ; and when I did at length force myself to perform the disagreeable office, I was conscious of doing it in a very lame and inefficient manner.

“ Going away to-morrow ! ” ejaculated the vicar, while his daughter looked quickly up from some fancy work in which she happened to be engaged, and fixed her eyes penetratingly upon my face ; “ isn’t this rather a sudden move ? ”

“ Yes,” I admitted, speaking as indifferently as I could ; “ he only received Sir Stafford’s letter this morning. He told me to say,” I went on, addressing myself exclusively to Mr. Vaughan, “ that if he could possibly find time he would ride over in the morning to take leave of you, but in the event of his being by any chance prevented, he thought, perhaps, you would kindly excuse him.”

“ Oh, certainly,” was the bland, good-natured reply, ‘ he must of course study his

own convenience ;” and with this he would probably have dismissed the subject but for a certain something in my face which seemed to strike him, for he continued in quite another tone, “there is nothing the matter, is there?”

“Well, so far, there is,” I answered regretfully, “to *me*, at least, as I find I must bring my pleasant visit to a close.”

“What! you never mean to say *you* are going too?” expostulated the astonished vicar.

His daughter said nothing, but she regarded me with another swiftly investigating glance, and then dropped her eyes once more upon her work.

“Yes, and I am more sorry than I can tell you,” was my unaffectedly serious rejoinder.

“Is it really necessary that you should accompany Mr. Stafford!” inquired the hospitable clergyman in a very concerned and sympathising voice.

“I think it is my duty to go,” I replied reflectively ; “in the first place, Sir Stafford is particularly anxious for me to do so ; then there are a good many business arrangements

to be made with regard to our next trip, and Edmund has not much capacity or inclination for anything in the shape of dry details."

"No, he's too fond of pleasure for that," assented Mr. Vaughan, with a laugh which showed that he did not altogether blame him.

"I don't quite know how we shall be situated," I resumed presently; "but, if I get the chance, may I pay you another flying visit before we again leave England?"

"*May you!* My dear boy, you know how glad we always are to have you," he exclaimed rather reproachfully. "I have told you over and over again that I wish you to look upon this as your home."

"Thank you;" and I could not help putting out my hand and grasping one of his, for I felt that up to a certain point he certainly meant what he said; and to a homeless wanderer like myself, the thought of a kind friend and a warm welcome was sweet indeed.

"In fact, we shall miss you more than you think," he went on with frank cordiality; "shall we not, my pet?" and he appealed for the first time to his daughter, who took no

apparent notice, however, of the question, for she rose at that moment from her seat and crossed the room as if with the intention of closing the pianoforte.

Of course I instantly went to do it for her, and just for an instant our eyes met—*mine* gravely, sorrowful no doubt, *hers* sparkling with a very unwonted degree of excitement. There was a pink spot too, on each cheek while the red lips were pressed tightly together, and her whole appearance denoted that she was labouring under some strangely agitating emotion.

Before I could recover my own presence of mind sufficiently to address her, she had turned abruptly away from me, and was in the act of once more resuming her work, when the vicar was suddenly summoned to the library to keep an appointment with a brother magistrate on important business.

No sooner had the door closed upon him, than the spell which had hitherto held her silent, seemed broken, and she exclaimed in impetuous haste, glancing meanwhile rather aggressively towards me :

“What does it all mean?”

“Mean?” I stammered out, too utterly

bewildered to make any more sensible response.

“Yes ; why are you sending him away ?” and the indignant eyes fixed themselves relentlessly upon my perturbed countenance.

“Sending him away !” I repeated the words mechanically, scarcely knowing that I spoke at all.

“When I saw him this morning,” she hurriedly resumed, “he had no intention whatever of going ; he had arranged even what he would do to-morrow and the next day, and——” here she paused for a moment to struggle with her emotion ; “it is entirely your fault taking him away.”

I had fancied my heart was heavy enough before, but it was positively light compared to what it now felt, on hearing her thus confess as it were the interest she took in her late companion.

For what else could her agitation mean ? how otherwise could I account for her reproachful language, except by concluding that she resented my supposed interference in Mr. Stafford’s affairs ; that she bitterly regretted being deprived of his society, and had conceived a violent aversion to me for

having been the means of separating them?

Still, even if my suspicions in this respect were correct, and her susceptible and highly-emotional nature *had* succumbed to the fascinations and flatteries of her late companion, I could not feel that I was in any wise to blame for what I had done ; the only thing I was inclined to reproach myself for, was not having taken measures for preventing their having become acquainted at all.

And yet, how could I, under the circumstances, have acted differently? How was I for one instant to suppose that he would make such rapid progress in the regard—I will not say affection—of a girl like Laura Vaughan, who, unless I entirely misunderstood her character, would never (so I fondly imagined) really care for a man who possessed so superficial and shallow a mind as that which characterised this poor infatuated young man.

Now I could only hope that her imagination rather than her heart had been touched, and that when once the object of her fancied preference had actually left the neighbourhood, the impression which he had unfortu-

nately produced upon her would speedily be removed, enabling her to blot out the remembrance of this melancholy little episode from her memory.

And as these thoughts rapidly flashed across me, I began to recover something of my usual grave composure, and pressing back with a firm hand all obtrusive reflections connected with myself and my own disappointed hopes, I essayed a few cautious words, intended to assist in helping to reconcile her to what had occurred.

“The fact is Mr. Stafford *never* remains long in one place,” I observed pacifically ; “besides, you would not surely wish to keep him away from his father now that the latter is ill ?”

“*I* do not wish to keep him,” she retorted, her pride instantly taking the alarm, and the slight fragile form was drawn up with a little gesture of offended dignity ; “but what is the use of your pretending to papa and me that he is going away of his own accord, when you know very well that it is all your doing ? The truth is, you are just tired of us yourself, and——”

“Tired of you !” I ejaculated, almost with a groan ; “Oh, I see !”

“But that is no reason why you should drag him away,” she continued, taking no notice of the interruption; “against his will, too!” she added meaningly.

“If you knew him a little better, you would understand that he is not, as a rule, so easily guided,” I answered, with ever so faint a tinge of bitterness in my tone, for it was gall and wormwood to me to hear her thus appearing, as it were, to take his part, and speak of him as a deeply injured and much-to-be-pitied individual.

“That may be,” she returned, coming persistently back to the point, “but you cannot deny that it was your idea sending him away—and going yourself, too!” this was added *sotto voce*.

“There was a time when you would have trusted me,” I said, rather reproachfully.

“Yes; and *you*——” she began, in an eager, excited voice; then she paused abruptly, and set her lips firmly together, as if afraid of saying something she had made up her mind not to say.

“Won’t you trust me, still?” I asked, encouraged somehow by her manner. “And

believe me when I tell you that I would not for the world vex you if I could help it."

"I am not vexed," she asserted, in a low constrained voice; "not as you think; only —— Oh, you are so stupid!" and she laughed hysterically.

"You are quite right," I responded, in all sincerity; "I am a stupid, blundering fellow, I know."

A curious little smile stole over the fair face as I made this admission, and she hastily unclosed her lips as if to speak, but resolutely shut them again the next moment, and turning slightly away from me, began absently to arrange the contents of a small filigree basket which stood on her work-table.

"There is one thing I should like to say to you, if I thought I might speak plainly without running the risk of giving you offence," I observed, after vainly trying to read the expression of her half-averted countenance.

"What?" she demanded, in a muffled voice.

"Simply this: it does not always follow

that the most pleasant and fascinating people are necessarily the most reliable."

"What is this *apropos* to?" she asked, rather sharply, "yourself, or Mr. Stafford—or both?"

"Well, to be candid with you," I hastily rejoined, "I want you to try and forget him as soon as you can. I know you won't be angry with me for speaking like this," I went on gently, "as, I can assure you, your happiness is very dear to me; and for the sake of old times——"

"Why should I try and forget him?" she exclaimed, suddenly confronting me with what looked like a gleam of defiance in her eyes.

"I cannot tell you my reasons, now," I gravely responded; "but some other day I will—years hence, perhaps!" I added, musingly.

"Very well, I shall remind you of your promise. Good-night;" and she abruptly held out her hand.

"You are not offended with me?" I anxiously asked her.

"Offended? Oh, no! Why should I be?" speaking in the coldest and most indif-

ferent of tones ; and without another word she was gone.

I had never seen her in this mood before, and the more I considered the matter, the more puzzled was I to understand her conduct.

That she was angry with me, was quite evident ; and hard though it was for me to find myself thus misjudged, and my motives altogether misinterpreted, I felt that there was no help for it but to put up with it, and try to derive a certain amount of consolation in the knowledge that I had, so far as I knew how, striven to act for the best, both with regard to herself and Mr. Stafford.

Very little sleep visited my eyes that night, and when I entered the breakfast-room the next morning, I felt strangely embarrassed and uncomfortable at the idea of meeting my incensed young hostess, and, perhaps, having to go through a repetition of the last night's reproaches.

I found her alone, standing at the window, with a graver expression than usual upon her face, and her eyes meditatively fixed upon the landscape ; but no sooner did she get sight of me, than, to my amazement,

she came hastily forward, and without giving me time even to wish her good-morning, she offered me her hand, saying impulsively :

“ Oh, I am so sorry for the cross, unkind things I said to you last night ; do forgive me, Charlie !” and the beautiful eyes sought mine with a wistful, penitent expression, while her voice actually quivered with emotion.

“ There is nothing to forgive,” I quickly replied, as I gently pressed the small white hand, almost without knowing what I was doing, so utterly unprepared had I been for anything like this.

“ But, indeed, there is !” she tearfully insisted ; “ and I ought to be ashamed of myself for treating you so unjustly. The fact is, I was vexed and out of temper,” she frankly explained, a sudden wave of colour flushing over her cheeks, “ and I made you suffer for it.”

“ Don’t think of it, dear !” the word slipped out unawares, and though I was angry with myself for saying it, I did not stop to apologise ; “ I am only too glad to know that we are once more friends, and I sincerely trust we shall always remain so.”

“ How could we be anything but friends,

after all these years?" she murmured, softly.

Seeing her in this gentle and subdued mood, the temptation came upon me then and there to tell her of my own deep and unalterable love, and ask her whether there was any hope of my ever obtaining from her something stronger and warmer than mere friendship; but, happily for my own peace of mind and self-respect, I was able to restrain myself from taking a step which would probably have had the effect of putting an effectual stop to all intercourse between us for the future, and changed Mr. Vaughan, perhaps, from a kind and generous friend, into a cold and suspicious enemy, so thoroughly opposed was he to anything in the shape of a mean or dishonourable action.

It was a considerable relief to me when the vicar at length joined us, thus putting a stop to a *tête-à-tête* which I was beginning to find slightly embarrassing; as, now that Laura had returned to her old lovable, bewitching self, and was all softness and gentleness, I felt more and more overpowered with the sense of her worth and beauty—more and more a prey to the keenest pangs of

regret as I thought of leaving her—leaving her, too, for an indefinite time, for our next trip was to be a long one, and although I had spoken the previous night about paying another brief visit to the vicarage before we started, I had not much hope or expectation of being able to do so. How much, therefore, might happen before I had another opportunity of seeing the girl I loved so dearly! She might, and probably would, for anything I knew to the contrary, have left the vicarage by the time I next returned to it—have gone to brighten and beautify a home of her own—to be to another man what, but for the accidents of fortune, she might have been to myself!

The idea was painful in the extreme; and yet, have I not said that I loved her better than myself? and if so, I ought, I suppose, to have taken pleasure in surveying her possible future happiness, even although I was in my own person to be left out in the cold, and only permitted to witness it from afar.

There was no further mention of Mr. Stafford's name, neither did we see anything of him before I left. Accordingly I drove,

as we had arranged the previous day, direct to the station, where I found him impatiently awaiting me, having by some mistake arrived nearly a quarter of an hour too soon.

At first he was inclined to be somewhat sulky, maintaining an air of dignified reserve, and nipping in the bud all my well-meant attempts to interest or amuse him. But this was a *rôle* which he could not, however much he might have wished it, possibly keep up long, as he had very few resources in himself, and was by no means independent of the good offices of other people by way of shortening the journey for him, and making the time pass pleasantly.

Long before we reached our destination, therefore, I had the satisfaction of seeing him restored to his usual state of careless good-humour, and during the next few days I contrived, by keeping him always employed, either in sight-seeing or some other harmless diversion, to give him no cause for complaining of dulness, or bemoaning, as he would otherwise have done, the sacrifice I had forced him to make with regard to Laura Vaughan.

As it was, however, he could not altogether

refrain from giving vent to an occasional querulous outburst, which showed that he still, to a certain extent, resented the pressure I had brought to bear upon him; and, on such occasions, I had enough to do to soothe and pacify him, and prevent him from dwelling too often and exclusively upon a subject which was naturally a very painful and humiliating one, so far as he was concerned, and one which might, if indulged in, lead to very unpleasant reflections.

He questioned me most minutely as to how Miss Vaughan received the news of his approaching departure; what she said; and how she looked; and whether she seemed disappointed at his not appearing in person to take leave of her, and numerous other trivial particulars; but I was, of course, extremely guarded in my answers, and the amount of information which he received from me was of so vague and meagre a description, that he became at length quite tired of putting so many questions and getting in return nothing but unsatisfactory and ambiguous replies, and gave up the attempt in disgust.

Less than a week sufficed to make him

discontented with the Isle of Wight—I rather suspect, however, that it was his father rather than the place which wearied him, for he could rarely spend five minutes in the baronet's society without being in some way or other chafed and irritated.

Poor Sir Stafford ! it certainly seemed very hard that, loving his son as he did, and being so thoroughly anxious to do him good, he should yet be utterly unable to exert any beneficial influence over him.

At a distance they remained excellent friends, but when they were once brought face to face the result was invariably the same: *Edmund* declared that his father's mild reproaches and solemn adjurations, his sorrowful looks and pitiful sighs, so far from softening him or making him wishful to reform, only had the effect of stirring up all the evil in his nature, hardening his heart, and rendering him more reckless and defiant than ever; while Sir Stafford mournfully confessed that he might, for any good his counsels did, just as well talk to the winds—and *better*, I sometimes privately thought, for in that case no harm would have been done, whereas his poor misguided son gene-

rally lost his temper, retired from the interview angry and excited, and more than ever convinced that he had, to use his oft-repeated expression, been "stroked the wrong way."

I have not made any special allusion to the other members of the Stafford family, as they were not at all interesting either in themselves or because of the relation they bore to my friend Edmund.

His mother was a confirmed invalid—one of those peevishly-disposed persons who think of nothing but themselves and their own real or imaginary ailments; consequently she was a very unlikely person to win the confidence or affection of her erratic and pleasure-loving son, who did not believe in her so-called maladies, and had not a spark of sympathy for her presumable sufferings; while her two daughters were vapid and commonplace characters, singularly unattractive in their manner, and having nothing whatever to distinguish them from the rest of the world, save perhaps that they were a trifle prouder and more exclusive than most girls of their age, and seemed to consider it their bounden duty to make up, as far as they possibly could for the general laxity of their brother's

conduct, by the stiffness and ultra propriety of their own.

The baronet was without doubt the best and most pleasant and agreeable member of the family, and the one who appeared to me by far the most deserving of respect and esteem ; for in spite of a few trifling peculiarities, and the unfortunate way he had of arousing his son's ire and indignation by the slightly fussy and tactless manner in which he applied himself to the hopeless task of making him see the error of his ways, he was a thoroughly excellent and generous-hearted man, and the more I saw of him, the more I loved and pitied him.

My heart ached for him when I noted the wistful, yearning look which would sometimes overspread his face as he turned it towards the unappreciative object of his affection ; and I tried, in answering his many anxious questions as to what I thought of Edmund's future prospects, and whether there was a chance of his ever returning to the paths of steadiness and sobriety, to speak as hopefully as I could, without, of course, saying anything which was positively untrue.

Up to a certain point it was my duty, I

felt, to be frank with him, as it would be cruel kindness for me to pretend that matters were progressing more favourably than they really were, and thus buoy him up with hopes which would probably never be realised. I did not conceal from him, therefore, the fact that, so far, my efforts had not met with that measure of success which could have been wished ; but at the same time I did not hesitate to recount to him my encouragements, such as they were ; and I studiously kept in the background many little incidental episodes, which would, if related, have inflicted a keener pang upon the old man's tender heart, and brought a deeper furrow to the already worn and weary brow.

On the whole, I am thankful to believe that I did him good rather than harm ; for he certainly brightened up very considerably after the conversations we thus held together on this most interesting and important subject ; and when he wrung my hand at parting, the dear old man invoked a blessing upon my head for, what he was generously pleased to term, my noble and self-denying exertions on behalf of his unfortunate son ; and there were actually tears in my own eyes as I

turned sorrowfully away from him, wishing from my very soul that I had it in my power to be of some practicable use to him, by way of testifying my regard for himself, and the anxiety I really felt respecting the mental, moral, and physical welfare of the one of all others in whom he was the most deeply interested.

This was the very last occasion on which I ever saw Sir Stafford Stafford ; for before we returned from our next trip he had been called away to his long rest, leaving the son who had cost him so many and such bitter regrets, to step into the place which *he* had so well and ably occupied, and fulfil the duties of a position for which he had not, as yet, shown the slightest fitness.

But I must not anticipate, as there seemed no present reason to suspect that any such unfortunate contingency would arise, and I am anxious to record in its proper place a little incident which occurred to myself, giving rise to a repetition of some of those vague and far-fetched surmises with regard to my own personal identity which had on some few previous occasions visited

me ; but which I had, as I thought, succeeded in entirely banishing from my mind, so wild and improbable and unlikely—nay, impossible did they appear, when tested by the touchstone of reason and common sense.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT IS YOUR NAME ?

“Mystery is man’s life ; we wake to the whisperings of novelty ;
And what though we lie down disappointed ? we sleep to wake in hope.
The letter, or the news, the chances and the changes, matters that may happen,
Sweeten or embitter daily life with the honey-gall of mystery.
For we walk blindfold—and a minute may be much—a step may reach the precipice ;
What earthly loss, what heavenly gain, may not this day produce ?”

THE incident to which I referred in my last chapter was simply this.

My old friend and pupil, Harold Fortescue, having heard of my being in England, had written to me more than once; asking me to visit himself and his father at Fortescue

Hall ; but, not being at all sure as to Mr. Stafford's movements, and wishing moreover to spend as much time as I possibly could with the Vaughans, I had declined these invitations, and fully expected to have left the country without seeing either of them.

By a fortunate coincidence, however, it so happened that while my companion and myself were in London, whither we had gone on leaving the Isle of Wight for the purpose of transacting a few necessary matters of business before setting out afresh on our travels, we came face to face with Harold ; and hearing from him that his father was spending a few days in the neighbourhood of Richmond, I could not resist the temptation of running down to see him.

Mr. Stafford accompanied me, and after spending some very pleasant hours in his society we returned to London, from whence we intended starting the following day for India.

Just as we arrived at the Richmond station, I observed a very handsome equipage suddenly drive up, out of which presently stepped a lady and gentleman. I should probably have gone on my way without

giving them a second thought, had it not been that they got into the same railway carriage with ourselves, and I was rendered slightly uncomfortable by the persistent way in which the gentleman proceeded to investigate my own personal appearance.

At first I took no notice of it, thinking that he was not perhaps aware of the fixity and intentness of his gaze ; but after a while I became conscious that the sight of me seemed to have awakened some strange sort of emotion within him ; for when I began in my turn to examine *his* countenance, I was almost startled by the extraordinary pallor which had come over it, and the keenly anxious expression which was plainly discernible in his eyes.

He was a tall, commanding-looking man, with a proud stern face, and strikingly handsome features. His hair and whiskers were grey—almost white—and there were thoughtful lines about his forehead and mouth, such as showed that his disposition was by no means a placid or easy-going one ; that he could be both hard and inflexible, and if he were to make up his mind to follow a certain set course, he would probably do it, however

much he might, himself, suffer in consequence.

His companion — evidently his wife — appeared somewhat younger than himself, and, judging from her slightly affected manner, and the unmistakable self-complacency of her expression, she seemed to have a very high opinion of her own personal charms — which were, to make the best of them, of a very mediocre description: her face being a decidedly plain one, while her figure, in spite of the appliances of dress, was far too angular to be considered good.

A passing glance was all that I bestowed upon *her*, and then my attention was once more concentrated upon her husband, the strangeness of whose manner seemed rather to increase than diminish, as we drew near the end of our short journey.

Much I wondered what it all meant; what there was in my appearance to make him gaze at me with such an eager strained look, just as if he was trying to read every curve and feature, committing each separate lineament, as it were, to memory, apparently forgetful for the nonce of all his other surroundings; where he was, and whither

going, and in whose company ; realising nothing in fact, but the sense of my presence, though, how that of itself could thus powerfully affect him was a question which a far wiser head than mine would have had some difficulty just then in answering.

Once Mr. Stafford, who was sitting at the other end of the carriage, carelessly turning over the pages of the *Graphic*, broke the silence, by asking rather abruptly :

“Do you happen to know, Charlie, whether young Fortescue intends returning to Oxford?”

“Oh, yes—he goes back next week,” I answered, not, however, before I had seen my *vis-à-vis* give a quick start, and heard him mutter below his breath, as if he had suddenly received some startling and most important piece of information—“*Charlie!*”

This, coupled with his former behaviour, aroused my curiosity to that degree, that I became nearly as excited as himself ; and when, a few seconds later, we all alighted at the same station, I was not conscious of the least surprise on seeing him gently touch my arm, while whispering hurriedly in my ear :

“Do not lose sight of me—I want to speak to you.”

I merely answered him by a look ; but as he moved slowly forward I mechanically followed at a little distance, utterly regardless of the remonstrances of Mr. Stafford, who was energetically trying to draw me away in an opposite direction.

After conducting his companion to a carriage which was evidently waiting for them, the stranger said a few words to her, apparently in an indifferent matter-of-fact tone ; then, without waiting for any rejoinder on her part, he signed to the footman to close the door, and the next instant she was being driven rapidly away, while her husband lost no time in coming back to my side.

“Tell me who you are?” this was his first eager inquiry, as he drew me somewhat impatiently aside from the little crowd of passers-by.

Here was a difficulty ! for how could I tell him what I did not know myself ?

“What is your name ?” he went on, abruptly, on seeing me hesitate ; “I do not ask from idle curiosity,” he added, in a slower and rather more composed tone, “and I must

ask you to excuse me if I seem brusque ; but I am in a great hurry."

"Unfortunately I can only give you my Christian name," I answered, in an agitated voice ; "the other is not, properly speaking, my own, and I have, therefore, no right to it."

"No right to it ?" he exclaimed, in a quick imperious tone ; "how ? I do not understand you ! what do you mean ?"

"It's rather a long story," I observed, fixing my eyes earnestly upon his agitated face, as if I would fain discover from it whether he had the power of clearing up the mystery which had all my life enveloped me.

"And I have scarcely five minutes to spare," he muttered, almost with a groan, taking out his watch as he spoke, and then replacing it, with a little impatient movement, in his pocket.

Thus far, Mr. Stafford had remained an amazed, though silent spectator of the scene, firmly believing, as he afterwards informed me, that I had suddenly gone out of my mind ; but when he saw the state of mutual excitement we were in, and took in the sense

of the stranger's words, a glimmer of the truth dawned across him, and he gallantly came to our help, by saying, in his easy and graceful way :

"I can, in a very few minutes, give you an outline of my friend's history ; and perhaps you may be able to fill in the particulars with which he is himself unacquainted."

And he rapidly proceeded to sketch out a brief epitome of my life for the benefit of this unknown acquaintance, who listened greedily to every word, put a few short concise questions at the close of the recital, and then, having caught the word Middlebury, he turned once more towards myself, and asked in a restrained, hesitating tone :

"Did you ever meet a man of the name of Whitworth there?"

"Yes ; I lived in his house all the time I attended the Middlebury College," I replied ; "and—oh, do you know him?" I eagerly demanded, as the remembrance of the strange interest which he also had taken in me suddenly returned to my excited imagination.

"Lived in his house !" ejaculated the

stranger; wonder, incredulity, and dismay being all expressed in his tone.

He put up his hand as he spoke, and hastily lifted his hat a few inches from his head, as if to cool his heated brow, and my eye instantly caught the flash of a magnificent diamond ring, which sparkled on his finger.

“Pardon me—*that ring!*” I incoherently exclaimed, pointing eagerly towards it; “it is exactly the same as that which was taken off my dead mother’s hand! Look, Edmund!” and I hastily tore off my glove and pointed to it—it was only within the last few weeks that I had commenced wearing it, and many people had asked to examine it as much for the peculiarity of its setting, as the size and brilliancy of its diamonds.

“Yes, there can be no mistake about it,” remarked Mr. Stafford, glancing from my hand to the stranger’s; “one is evidently a *fac simile* of the other! they were probably made at the same time;” and he paused and directed a shrewd questioning gaze at our unknown companion, whose features were working convulsively, while his eyes seemed literally glued to my finger, though he appeared nervously anxious to conceal his own.

“I must go now,” he said presently, and he spoke like one in a troubled dream; “I shall be late as it is.”

“Surely you will tell me first in what way you are connected with myself?” I remonstrated, laying a detaining hand upon his arm just as he was moving away.

“I cannot!” he answered, in a faint sepulchral voice, a sort of grey look coming over his face.

“At any rate you will give me your name and address?” I somewhat indignantly retorted; “you cannot refuse, as a gentleman, to do that;” I added this in answer to an inflexible movement of his head.

“I *cannot*!” he said again, this time in a gentle, wistful tone; “I am bound—doubly bound—to hold my peace——”

“Why then have you raised my expectations?” I passionately interposed; “why have you awakened hopes only to crush them?”

“God help me! I did it for the best!” he murmured excusingly, more to himself than me; “I felt myself impelled to find out who you were; and one day it will be all the better for you that I did speak.”

“Do you still refuse to give me your name?” I asked gloomily, “even under the seal of secrecy?” and I looked persuasively into his face.

“For your own sake it is better not,” he answered impressively; “no possible good could come from the disclosure.”

These were words almost identically the same as those which Mr. Whitworth had used, when I begged him to tell me who it was of whom I so strongly reminded him, and a horrible doubt stole for the first time into my mind, a terrible misgiving lest I might, without ever knowing or suspecting the fact, be the lawful possessor only of a heritage of shame or crime.

“Tell me one thing more,” I chokingly asked him, “is there any disgrace attached to me? anything which would prevent my——”

“No—a thousand times no!” was the emphatic assurance; “you have nothing to be ashamed of—thank God for that!” and before I could divine his intention, he had put out his hand and grasped mine with a vice-like pressure, stepped into a hansom which he had previously called, and was driven away!

“We could follow him, no doubt,” musingly observed Mr. Stafford, as he noticed the hasty movement I made in that direction, “but I really don’t see what use it would be. Even if you found out who he was, that would tell you nothing more than you already know; and as for getting anything out of him, he’s just the kind of man who would allow himself to be torn limb from limb rather than divulge a secret he considered himself bound to keep.”

“What *can* the mystery be?” I muttered, as I absently accompanied my friend to our hotel.

“Never mind! I shouldn’t bother myself about it, if I were you,” was the philosophical reply; “I dare say it will all be cleared up one day; and if not it doesn’t much signify; you are quite able to make your way in the world without the assistance of other people.”

“It’s not that I am thinking of,” I answered rather impatiently; “just put yourself in my place; how would *you* like to be sent adrift upon the world without a name?”

“It would make very little difference to

me," was the half-laughing rejoinder; "if you had said without *money* now, I could sympathise with you," he went on, shrugging his shoulders, "for in my opinion the one is far more valuable than the other."

"I don't care for money," I rather impulsively began, "except——" and then I stopped abruptly, for had I not lately been almost wishing that, instead of being a sort of penniless adventurer, I had a fortune of my own which I could lay at Laura Vaughan's feet, hoping that the fact of my possessing a certain amount of worldly riches might incline her father to excuse my other deficiencies in the shape of name and position.

"I should not be at all surprised if you were to be a rich man yourself one day," remarked my companion, after a pause.

"What makes you think so?" I inquired, giving a little astonished start, for it almost seemed as if he had read my thoughts.

"Did you not hear what your incognito said, about its being all the better for you that he had found you out? Depend upon it he intends to do something for you."

"I should be very much inclined to refuse

to accept anything from him if he did," was my surprised rejoinder.

"It may be only his duty to provide for you, you know," returned Mr. Stafford, in a significant tone, "now that he has discovered your existence."

"You mean——" I said, my face flushing hotly at the bare idea.

"Yes, it is just possible that he may be your father; in fact, between ourselves, I believe he is."

"I do not think so," I rejoined, after a moment's consideration.

"How can you tell? you surely do not expect to recognise the relationship by instinct."

"Not exactly; and yet I really think I *should* know him without being told, if we ever did meet."

"What an idea!" laughed the other.

"Besides," I went on gravely, "if I was really his son, how could he have the heart to treat me as he has done? The least he could do would be to give me the benefit of his name."

"Well, I don't quite see that," remarked Mr. Stafford, with more shrewdness than he

was in the habit of displaying ; “ he probably took it for granted long ago that you were dead, and as he has got another wife, and perhaps a son who has been brought up to consider himself the heir to his property (and for anything we can tell to the contrary *title*, for he’s evidently a man of considerable importance) it is, looking upon it in a certain light, only natural that he should wish things to remain in their present state, rather than expose himself to the legal difficulties and possible complications which might arise in the event of your being permitted to take your proper place as his eldest son.”

“ I should be quite willing, and more than willing, to waive anything in the shape of legal rights,” I answered thoughtfully, “ if I could only know to whom I really belong, and hear myself called at last by my own proper name.”

“ Yes ; but don’t you see it would have to be all or nothing ?” quickly retorted my amused companion. “ If it was once known that you were Incognito’s eldest son, the reigning heir—always supposing there *is* one—would instantly have to be deposed in favour of yourself, without any reference

whatever to your own personal wishes on the subject."

"Well, I suppose, under present circumstances, there is nothing for it but to be patient," I replied; and, with a sigh of stoical resignation, I set about our few remaining preparations for the next day's journey.

Late though the hour was when I adjourned to my own room, I yet contrived to write two letters—one to Mr. Vaughan, and the other to Mr. Whitworth—before I finally retired to rest. It was just possible, I thought, that the latter would recognise the stranger from my description of him, and perhaps even consent to tell me who he was. But, in any case, I thought it well to inform him of our late interview, so that he might be prepared for whatever step this mysterious individual might think proper to take with regard to making himself more thoroughly conversant than he had already become with my past, present, and future prospects.

Mr. Vaughan too, would, I knew, be deeply interested in hearing of my unexpected encounter with one who, while eagerly devouring every scrap of information which he could

elicit as to my purely personal and private affairs, was yet obstinately bent on concealing all mention of his own. And I thought it just possible that he might even induce his friend, Mr. Whitworth, to lay aside for once the cautious reserve which had hitherto characterised him, and explain when and where, and under what circumstances, he had become acquainted with my unknown fellow-traveller (for that they *had* been acquainted with each other in days gone by, I never for one instant doubted); and whether he considered I should not, after what had happened, be fully justified in instituting certain searching inquiries by way of ascertaining the extent of my poor mother's probable wrongs, and satisfying myself as to the particular name I was entitled to bear if I chose to exercise my rights.

Having sent off these letters, I felt that I had done all that was just then practicable towards solving the problem which had been all my life, more or less, puzzling me.

Not that I was very hopeful even now as to the result, for I had never forgotten Mr. Whitworth's pale, sorrowful, determined face, when I had so earnestly begged him to tell

me who it was of whom I reminded him, and the concentrated sadness of his voice, as he declared that he could not, even to please me, give himself the exquisite torture of alluding to the dead and buried past.

It was of course within the limits of the *possible*, that, as circumstances alter cases, the fact of my having been thus brought face to face with this stranger, whose history seemed in some incomprehensible way mixed up with my own, *might* have the effect of unsealing Mr. Whitworth's lips, especially as his name had been distinctly brought forward, and it was therefore natural to suppose that some kind of intercourse must at one time or another have taken place between the two. Still, I scarcely thought it *probable*, and I tried, therefore, when the first excitement had worn off, and I was enabled to reflect on what had been said and done (or rather *looked*, for it was more by manner and appearance than words, that the Incognito had betrayed himself during our late exciting interview), with comparative calmness and tranquillity; to forget, so far as I possibly could do so, that there had been any break in the uniform current of my existence. Any

hopes raised only to be dashed to pieces the next moment; any fond aspiring ideas checked in their very birth, stirring ambitions forced back with an iron grasp; sweet visions dissipated, and myself compelled to go on my solitary way unblessed by the love of a single relation; not one heart in the wide world to respond to my own; none to take me by the hand and say, "You belong to us," to rejoice in my joy, and sympathise in my sorrow, and make me feel, not a lonely outsider, but one of a group—a help and a comfort to others, a giver and receiver of life's choicest blessings.

And yet there are many—I have frequently met with them in my wanderings, and, in my grave, speculative way, marvelled over their lack of tenderness, or sympathy, or affection, I scarcely know *which*—who seem to care nothing at all for these sweet and sacred family ties.

It is hard to realise it; but so it is. They do not appreciate their relations in the very least, regarding them, on the contrary, in many cases, as positive nuisances; and if they had only known how often I have envied them the possession of that for which I had

myself vainly craved, they would probably have turned me into the greatest ridicule.

I do not include Edmund Stafford in this list, as he must not be judged quite like other people, and, with the exception of his father, there was certainly no one in his immediate home-circle at all calculated to call forth anything in the way of affection or regard; though I must at the same time confess that I never knew any one who cared less for what he generally termed his "people," father, mother, and sisters, uncles, aunts, and cousins, all coming under the same vaguely-distinctive denomination, and being regarded with a sort of passive indifference scarcely amounting to actual dislike, and yet not far removed from it.

Poor fellow! With all his occasional gleams of generosity and good-nature, he was the very essence of selfishness! Little cared he for the feelings of other people, if he could only compass his own ends; and his very virtues, if I may so express myself, would have seemed failings in other people.

He speedily got over his passing fancy for Miss Vaughan, and, in the excitement of travel and other things, he apparently con-

trived to shake off all unpleasant reflections, and banish from his mind the remembrance of the mortification I had caused him by adopting such unequivocal measures for obliging him to discontinue his visits to the vicarage.

This fact naturally made me congratulate myself on the step I had taken ; and whenever my thoughts strayed (as they were perpetually doing), to the beautiful and accomplished girl over whom he had been casting the glamour of his fascinating attentions, I breathed a prayer that any impression which his flattering words, and still more dangerous looks and manner, had produced upon her sensitive imagination, might very soon be effaced, now that she was no longer exposed to the magnetic influences of his society.

END OF VOL. II.



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS-URBANA



3 0112 056544387